

WESTERN STORY IO[¢]

STREET AND SMITH'S

ZINE NOV. 11 1939

NOV. 11 '39



GUN WOLVES OF THE BADLANDS
A NOVEL BY WALT COBURN



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STREET & SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

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CONTENTS FOR NOVEMBER 11, 1939 VOL. CLXXVIII NO. 1

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BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

GUN WOLVES OF THE BADLANDS Walt Coburn 9

It was an unholy alliance, that partnership between the branded outlaw and Bill Winters' bald-faced kid, but it might turn a coyote whelp into a fighting curly wolf. . . .

A SERIAL

IRON MALEMUTE Frank Richardson Pierce . . . 101

Fifth of Six Parts

Unless he could disprove the charge that he had sold "hungry" ground, Cal Donovan would see the finish of the Poor Man's Hell railroad from the inside of an iron-barred cell!

SHORT STORIES

RANGE PEDDLER Cliff Wolters 48

Pete Shepherd dealt in merchandise, hardware—and gunsmoke. . . .

CALL FOR A TOWNTAMER Harry F. Olmsted 58

A no-good saloon swamper they called Dishrag Benton, but when he went out to face that badman he walked with the ghosts of famous fighting marshals!

LORD OF THE HERD Dove Logon 73

The Paint Lands were honeycombed with hidden traps for Blue Danger and his faithful band. . . .

DEATH RIDES DOUBLE Wayne D. Overholser . . . 82

When a lawman rode out of Red Point his next stop was usually boothill, but Ranger Bob Royal was used to riding with Death for a saddle pard!

WESTERN STORY FEATURES

THE STORY OF THE WEST Gerord Delono 46

Episode LXXIX in the making of the cattle country.

FAMOUS PROSPECTORS John A. Thompson 69

George Jackson prospected the Rockies alone to find the gold he had a hunch was waiting for him. . . .

DEPARTMENTS

THE ROUNDUP The Editor 5**GUNS AND GUNNERS Phil Shorpe 93****MINES AND MINING John A. Thompson 95****THE HOLLOW TREE Helen Rivers 97****WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE John North 99**

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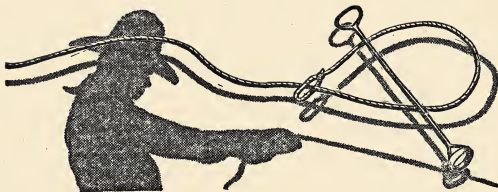


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The Roundup

AMONG the varied letters in our mailbag this week we find two which add other and interesting points of view to the friendly controversy now going on concerning ox teams—a subject which George Cory Franklin touched upon briefly in our July 1st issue.

Those of you who read these columns the week of September 23rd will recall that Mr. C. G. Williams took exception to the fact that Mr. Franklin said tractors and trucks had supplanted the familiar old ox teams in lumber camps throughout the country. The first of these letters is from a lady of eighty-three, a member of the Old-Timers Club, and is, indeed, an interesting bit of personal recollections. Mrs. Frances M. Hogan, of South Pasadena, California, writes to the Boss of The Roundup as follows:

"Concerning Mr. Williams' criticism of Mr. George Cory Franklin's articles on ox frames, I agree with you that Mr. Williams misconstrued Mr. Franklin's statement. I grew

up with the West when ox teams were common and used for many purposes from plowing to taking the early settlers to dances and other social affairs. While I have no doubt that ox teams are still used in remote places, I have not seen one for at least forty years, except at San Francisco's Expositions or the 'Days of '49 Celebrations.' I was much interested in Mr. Franklin's article and wondered how many people were still living besides myself who had ever seen an oxen shod."

Mrs. Hogan's experiences have apparently been very much different from those of Mr. Williams. "I evidently missed something in my bringing up," she says, "for I never saw or heard a 'moaning' ox team. Nor did I ever see a team of *bulls*. On a cattle range, *moaning* was a bull's fighting talk and they had to be kept separated by distance to keep them from exercising their desire for trouble whenever they came together. And that leads one to wonder how the six-yoke teams of bulls mentioned by Mr. Williams were handled to prevent trouble.

"And I don't understand either, how, after 'sharply cramping the wagon' when they went into the stream to drink and bathe their heads, they got the heavily loaded wagon into the water and straight-

ened out so it would follow them upstream to the place where they snaked it up to the cut on their knees.

"Or why were they moaning. Perhaps they felt degraded or something. Maybe at that I have misunderstood Mr. Williams and if so I apologize in advance."

And from Greenville, Mississippi, Mr. C. E. Campbell, a reader of *Western Story* for eighteen years has this to say:

"I have read with interest what Mr. C. G. Williams of Davenport wrote, criticizing George Cory Franklin's statement about tractors and trucks having taken the place of oxen and wagons handling logs. I was raised in Tennessee before the advent of trucks and tractors, and we used oxen for logging and farm work. I have not seen or heard of an ox team in the South in twenty years—but I do see trucks hauling logs most every day. I would also like to know where Mr. Williams saw gum trees six feet in diameter. In my life I never saw one over four . . ."

We want to thank both Mrs. Hogan and Mr. Campbell for writing in and giving us their views on this interesting subject. The only place we've ever seen ox teams happens to be in the West Indies, but a friend of ours, who was down in Alabama just a few months ago, had the following information to offer:

"While trucks and tractors have taken the place of oxen in relatively open country," our friend told us, "ox teams are still used for logging in swampy country which trucks and even tractors can't negotiate. Down in Washington County, oxen are used for logging in the swamps adjacent to the Tombigbee River. Pairs of oxen, yoked together, are

used to snake logs to high ground. Then three yokes of oxen are often harnessed to a two-wheel cart by which means several immense logs can be dragged to open country and loaded on trucks.

"However, even today the logs after being snaked out by oxen are often rafted together and floated down to Mobile. Nor is it unusual since the last depression to see oxen plowing in the Black Belt of Alabama and on Saturday afternoon a farmer often uses his ox to take him to town for supplies."

Perhaps some of our other members of *The Roundup* can add further to this parley?

We've had a mighty difficult time ridin' herd on our friend L. L. Foreman lately, for he's been "trailerin' it" all through the Far West. Texas, southern and northern California, Yellowstone National Park, the Grand Canyon, and the last time we heard, L. L. was in the Jemez Mountains of New Mexico. Seems a pal had told him the trout there were seventeen inches long—which we'll admit is sure trout for any man in any man's language! Now comes the following enthusiastic screed from Jemez Springs, and it looks like L. L. has found himself a new home. But let L. L. tell it to you in his own words:

"The report was true. Up here in the Jemez country they've got deer, bear, wild turkey, an occasional mountain lion, and trout worth trying for.

"I'm camped now in a green valley—Cebolla Valley, named after the river which runs through it—eight thousand feet elevation. It's eighteen miles from Jemez Springs, reached by the crookedest dirt road on earth, but well worth the drive.

These Jemez Mountains are covered with big pines, firs, spruce and quaking aspens. Here and there, high up, the great palisades of red rock show through for contrast against the green. Wild roses, bluebells, purple asters, and kinikinnik carpet the ground. The soil is rich, and there's plenty of water. The summers are invariably cool up here, the mountain folk tell me, and they average two rains a week. Down the mountain is the desert, hot, dry, where practically every living thing bites, pricks, or stings. --

"Archæologists have about decided that there is an ancient lost Indian pueblo somewhere around here. A friend of mine, who has forsaken the world gladly and moved up here to live, recently discovered an Indian olla while climbing the mountain slope back of his place. Archæologists who came out to see it put its age between four hundred and seven hundred years. It's a perfect specimen of black Jemez pottery, and there was a dipper in it when found. I climbed up to the site yesterday with this friend, and a climb it was to reach that ledge, and did some digging around, but unearthed nothing more. I'll try again, though. That olla is a splendid clue to the location of the lost pueblo.

"By the way, I found part of a Street & Smith magazine in one of the Yellowstone geyser pools. The silica had hardened the paper until it was as brittle as glass. I managed to get a few pieces of it, and still have them.

"This Cebolla Valley has got me. Folks here are real people, though very few live this far back in the mountains. When I drove in I found the whole valley expecting me, having learned from my friend

that I was coming, and they gave me a swell welcome. I'm being urged to spend the winter up here, but I'm afraid I can't do it. However, I've sort of compromised. I've arranged to buy a piece of this valley land from an old-timer who used to be a mission teacher in Jemez Pueblo forty years ago. Every chance I get I'll come up here and build my rock house, my barn, my underground cooler, my well, and some day I'll move up here for good. It's seventy-five miles to Albuquerque, and about the same distance to Santa Fe, easy distance to a city, any time I want one, which is seldom enough.

"These Jemez Indians, too, are good people, friendly, upstanding, self-respecting, colorful with their red bands around their long black hair. You'll see no miserable hogans here. They have their adobe houses, gay with strung red peppers and black ollas. Yes, I reckon this New Mexico is my country!"

In next week's issue—

The first installment of a powerful new serial by Luke Short, **DEAD FREIGHT FOR PIUTE**. Like Cole Armin, who came to a boom town to start a new life, you'll find Piute a hell's broth of lusty and exciting drama, with more trouble being stirred up than any one man could handle. Don't miss the beginning of this thrilling story.

Also on the tally book are a salty, pulse-quickening novel by Harry Sinclair Drago, stories by Tom Roan, E. C. Lincoln, B. Bristow Green, Frank Richardson Pierce, and many other favorites—plus, of course, a full string of departments.

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MAGAZINE

★ In its December number, Athlete presents a star-studded issue, including:

WHAT ALL-AMERICA?—H. O. (Fritz) Crisler, University of Michigan's head coach, speaks out on the benefits and evils in the present system of picking All-Americans.

HOLD 'EM, PITTSBURGH—The inside story of the Pitt Panther football situation by a famous sports writer who lived through it.

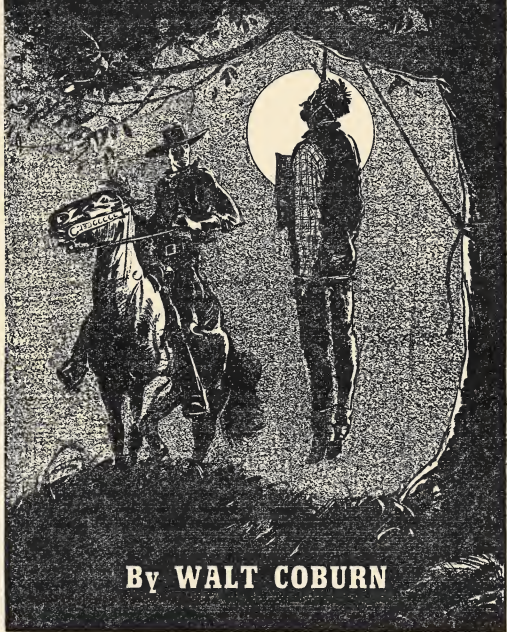
MAKER OF CHAMPIONS—Coach Wm. Foley gives the formula he has used in turning out grid, court and diamond champions in profusion at Bloomfield High School, N. J.

Also articles by **Kingsley Moses** who finds two million forgotten athletes; **Fred Keeling** who discusses the only real amateurs left in America and top-notch stories by **Jack Kofoed**, **Richard McCann** and others.

★ **Athlete**

ON SALE NOVEMBER 11th

GUN WOLVES OF THE BADLANDS



By WALT COBURN

CHAPTER I

TRAIL TO THE BADLANDS

JACK SABINO yanked young Pete Winters to his feet, gripped him by the front of his shirt, near the collar, and drove his right fist hard into the boy's battered face. Pete's knees buckled and he groaned weakly as Sabino let go of him. As he went down, he felt Sabino's booted foot smash his sore mouth.

Pete lay in the powdery dust of the corral, his arms protecting his head, blood spilling from his nose and mouth. Sabino kicked him contemptuously in the ribs and again in the belly and spat disgustedly at the young cowpuncher's quivering body. Then he picked Pete's six-shooter up out of the dust and threw it over the high pole corral.

"The next time you pull a gun on me, you young coyote," Sabino said, his lips flattening in a nasty, white-toothed grin, "I'll shoot a hole in your briskit."

Sabino's eyes were as green and hard as glass and his voice was flat-toned when he spoke to the half dozen Bow and Arrow cowhands who had come up in time to see him knock Pete down.

"This young whelp pulled a gun on me. He's goin' to git hisself killed some day. Open the gate and let the horses out. We'll throw 'em in the lower pasture on our way down the river. Let's git goin'."

Pete lay motionless there in the heavy dust as the big corral was emptied of horses. His ribs and belly pained him and his face felt stiff from Sabino's fists. There was the taste of warm blood and dirt in his mouth and his head ached. But these physical pains were nothing. He hardly felt them. He was too sick inside to feel anything but that horrible fear that numbed his body

and made him want to vomit or sob.

Sabino had hit him, had knocked him down. Picked him up out of the corral dust and knocked him down again. Kicked him like he'd kick a dog and spat on him. And Sabino had lied about the gun. Pete hadn't pulled any gun. He was too scared of Sabino to pull his gun or even lift his arms to fight back. He had lain there in the dirt and let himself be kicked, had played possum. Let on that he was knocked out. Because he had been too scared to get back on his feet.

There was a tight knot inside the pit of Pete's stomach that quivered and made his feel sick. From under his arm he watched the remuda of Bow and Arrow horses trickle out of the corral. Sabino and his half dozen tough cowpunchers were mounting their horses. Sabino said something and a cowhand called Spade laughed. Spade was Sabino's top hand and side-kick.

The men hazed the remuda past the branding corrals and chute and across the greasewood flat. Pete watched them until their dust hid them from sight in the gathering twilight. When they had gone, he rolled over on his side and sat up, wiping blood and dirt from his battered nose and mouth with the torn sleeve of his shirt. He got to his feet slowly, picking up his hat that Sabino had tromped into the thick yellow dust. There was a hard lump in his throat and his eyes felt hot and itchy. He knocked the dirt from his shapeless hat and then used it to slap the dust from his shirt and overalls.

There was only the cook, Greasy, left behind at the ranch and Greasy was drunk and sleeping it off somewhere in the brush behind the cook cabin. Pete took the trail down to the creek. He pulled off his shirt

and undershirt and got down on his hands and knees, taking perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes to wash off the blood and dirt.

Then he walked back to the bunkhouse and got a clean shirt and undershirt out of his war sack. His skin was not yet dry when he pulled on the undershirt, but it didn't matter. He was too sick inside with self-contempt and the nausea of reaction from fear to pay much attention to anything. He was pulling out; quitting the Bow and Arrow ranch that was rightfully, legally his. He was scared of Jack Sabino, so he was running out instead of standing up for his rights and claiming what belonged to him. He was a yellow-bellied coyote and a white-livered coward, he told himself bitterly.

PETE WINTERS was only seventeen, but he was tall and well made. His muscles were long and lean and hard. He stood an inch or so over six feet in his boots, almost as tall as Sabino, who was six feet three and weighed close to two hundred pounds. He was a grown man, but Sabino had cuffed him around like he was a weak kid. He had grabbed Pete, yanked the six-shooter from his holster and thrown it in the dirt. Then he had beat him up, with his tough-hand crew looking on, grinning and passing talk to one another as they watched Sabino whip a grown man as easily as he'd whip a sick squaw.

Pete wondered where he got that yellow streak. His father had been tough enough. Bill Winters had come up the trail to Montana Territory from Texas with a pool trail herd that had a hundred head of cows in the Bow and Arrow iron. He had located on the Missouri River above Rocky Point and built up a

good-sized cow outfit. He had fought Injuns on the way up the old Chisholm Trail. And many a time he had locked horns with rustlers and run them off his growing Bow and Arrow range. He had toughed out hard winters and dry summers, bucked blizzards and pulled weak cows out of the bog, built cabins and corrals and put his profits into more land and more cattle and good saddle stock. He had built up a big outfit, helped by his young wife who had come up from Texas with a wagon train with Pete when the boy was two years old. Like Bill Winters, she had had courage. The true courage of a pioneer woman.

Pete was fourteen when Jack Sabino and Spade fetched in Bill Winters' bullet-riddled body. Sabino had been wagon boss then, Spade one of his punchers. They said there had been some trouble with a gang of horse thieves from the Black Hills country. They had shot two of the horse thieves, but Bill Winters and one of the Bow and Arrow cowboys had been killed.

Bill Winters was buried there at the ranch. His widow had taken it almighty hard for a time but after six months or so her grief had worn itself out and she had begun to smile again. A year after Bill Winters had been buried she married Jack Sabino. The wagon boss had taken hold and run the outfit and had done everything a man could to make her cheerful and happy, and he had made Pete like him.

Sabino could be good company and he was big and handsome and a top cowhand. Bill Winters' widow had trusted him, and depended on him a lot to manage the outfit. She had married him, Pete knew, because she thought that marriage would give her and her young son a sort of security. Sabino was a born

leader of men. He had organized the Vigilantes and had sworn to shoot or hang the rustlers who had killed Bill Winters.

So one day Sabino and the Widow Winters had driven to Chinook in the buckboard to get married. On the way back to the ranch the team ran away, smashed the buckboard to kindling wood. Sabino had only been skinned up some, but Pete's mother had been killed. Her head had been caved in.

IT was after the funeral and when the court had appointed Jack Sabino as Pete's guardian, that the man began to change. Pete's mother had left no will. Pete and her second husband were therefore the sole heirs to the Bow and Arrow outfit. The court was taking its time to decide about the settlement of the estate. Pete Winters was a minor. Until he became of legal age, twenty-one years old according to the Territorial Law of Montana, Jack Sabino was custodian of the property and the boy's legal guardian.

Sabino had tried his best to get a more definite and satisfactory settlement of the estate, but until the courts decided otherwise he was accountable for the management of the Bow and Arrow outfit. All profits must be banked, all expenditures accounted for. The money was banked as a trust fund and Sabino could not draw from it without the legal sanction of Judge Miles at Chinook.

Sabino had quickly shed his rôle of protector and friend. He got drunk and abusive. He took away Pete's string of good cow horses and made him ride the rough string. Pete was a good hand with horses but he was no bronc twister. Nevertheless, Sabino made him ride outlaws that the bronc peeler had condemned as

spoiled horses. When Pete protested, Sabino beat him up. Pete would either ride broncs or do the chores around the ranch, cleaning out the barn, chopping wood for the cook, riding fence, mending harness and shoeing horses. He threw Pete's blankets and personal belongings out of the house and moved Spade into Pete's room. Pete moved his stuff into the bunkhouse.

Sabino and Spade would get drunk and shoot holes in the pictures that Bill Winters and his wife had hung on the walls. Spade chewed tobacco and spat where he damned pleased on the rugs and floors and walls. The house that Pete's mother had kept so neat and spotless was now as filthy as a pig pen. Empty bottles and jugs and cast-off socks and old underwear littered the corners. Handmade rag rugs and lace curtains were ruined. Cigarette stubs, tobacco and whiskey stains were everywhere. And if Pete made any sort of protest Sabino hit him.

Pete had kept the six-shooter, holster and cartridge belt that had belonged to his father, but it stayed in his war sack. Sabino was trying to crowd him into making some sort of desperate gun move. He was waiting for a chance to kill the boy. But he was going to make sure Spade and the other cowpunchers were there to swear that he had killed Pete Winters in self-defense.

But Pete was afraid to use his gun. Sabino was a fast gun fighter. He had built himself a tough reputation and was living up to it. The Bow and Arrow now had the name of being the toughest outfit in Montana. A man had to be a tough hand to work for Jack Sabino, who was still the leader of his so-called Vigilantes. Tonight, as he often did, he had taken his men and ridden away on some night riding business.

Pete found his six-shooter and wiped it clean. He saddled the bronc he had tied in the barn and shoved a carbine in the saddle scabbard. A sick feeling of shame swept over him as he rode past the graves of his father and mother in the dusk. He was a coward. He was running away in the night like a coyote because he didn't have the courage to stand up and fight the man who had robbed him and defiled the sacred memory of the man and woman who were buried here.

Pete was riding a big blue roan outlaw that he had managed, after being thrown and kicked at and tromped on, to gentle. The kid had a way with horses. He had learned a lot more about bronc handling since Sabino had given him the rough string to ride. No other man in the outfit could go near this big blue bronc Pete called Spook, but Spook was the best horse that wore the Bow and Arrow brand.

"Anyhow," Pete leaned forward and patted the blue roan's neck. "I'm not afoot. You'll take me to wherever we're goin', pardner. I wish to God you'd fetch me back some day a man."

It was with only that wishful prayer to deaden the dull ache in his heart that Pete Winters rode away from the Bow and Arrow ranch and into the night. The moon was shoving up over the ragged outline of the badlands as he crossed the Missouri River at the ford and took the trail down through the tall cottonwoods.

CHAPTER II

OWLHOOT PARTNERSHIP

SUDDENLY Spook whirled and snorted, and Pete's heart thumped in his throat, choking him again with fear. In those few split seconds before he got his bearings

he pictured Sabino making him get off his horse, and he felt the smashing thud of the big black-haired, black-mustached, green-eyed man beating him to his knees and kicking him in the face. He heard Spade's rasping, ugly laugh ringing in his ears. Saw the leering grins on the faces of Sabino's tough hands as they looked on.

But no riders came out of the brush. Sabino's voice did not challenge him. There was nobody blocking his get-away. The trail was clear. It might be a mountain lion or a bear in the brush, Pete thought. Then, as he brought the big blue roan around on the trail, he saw what had frightened the bronc.

There was a hanged man swinging at the end of a rope from the limb of a giant cottonwood. Head twisted sideways by the rope around its neck, arms tied behind its back, the motionless form showed plainly against the moonlit sky.

Sabino and his night riders had done this, Pete knew. They had hanged a man and ridden on, leaving a cardboard square with some printed words on it pinned to the breast of the hanged man's blue flannel, double-breasted shirt.

Pete coaxed the blue roan closer and opened the blade of his jack-knife. Reaching out, he slashed at the taut rope. He had to slash at it three or four times before he cut the rope in two. The hanged man plummeted to the ground with a sickening thud. Pete tied Spook to a flat willow bush and came back on foot.

Pete freed the rope with its big, clumsy-looking hangman's knot. The face of the hanged man looked ghastly in the white moonlight. The skin was a purplish-gray color and the lower jaw was covered by black-gray whiskers. Pete had never seen him before that he could remember,

but he had heard Sabino and Spade talking last night about a squatter across the river who needed some attention paid him.

The cardboard square was pinned to the flannel shirt with a horseshoe nail. Pete pulled his eyes from the



discolored face and read it. It was a grim warning that anybody cutting down the dead body and giving it a burial would be caught and punished by the Vigilantes. The crude lettering was plain enough in the white moonlight.

Pete cut the short length of rope that bound the man's hands behind his back. Somewhere not far away a wolf howled. Pete shivered a little and stood up, his hand on his gun. He couldn't leave a dead man to be torn apart by varmints. He would have to risk the chance of Sabino and his men coming back this way on their way to the home ranch. But he needed something to use to dig some sort of a grave.

He found the man's camp, a small one-man tepee. The bedroll had been torn apart, tarp and blankets scattered. The contents of the kyack boxes had been spilled on the ground, sacks and cans of food opened and thrown aside. Sabino had ransacked the camp in a hasty but thorough search for anything of value. There was a gold pan, shovel and miner's pick, a pack saddle and a double-rigged, full-stamped saddle with a catch rope and the saddle-horn worn to the steel by rope dangles, a pair of fringed leather chaps and a running iron. The hanged

man must have been a cowpuncher prospector. Two hobbled horses grazed not far away.

PETE took the pick and shovel and lost no time in getting to work on the grave-jigging job. Sabino and his men would be coming back before daylight to pick up the two horses and the saddle. They called themselves Vigilantes, but they murdered and robbed any prospectors along the river whom they figured had washed enough gold to merit robbing. There was no law along this strip of frontier save the Vigilante law, and that was used by Sabino to disguise his crimes.

Pete avoided looking at the purplish gray face and limp body of the hanged man. He turned his back and worked with feverish haste with pick and shovel. In a little while his arms and back and shoulders ached and sweat bathed his body. He was breathing heavily, sweat stinging his eyes. He had to hurry before Sabino got back here. It was a long chance to take. He had planned on being far beyond Sabino's murderous reach by daylight, but he couldn't leave a hanged man here for the wolves and coyotes and lions to fight over. He had fetched the bed tarp to wrap the body in. He'd give the hombre a decent burial. He had the grave nearly deep enough. Ten minutes more and the hole would be big enough—

"That'll fit yuh!"

The voice was a croaking, rasping whisper. Pete dropped the shovel and straightened up, whirling around in the trench he had dug. His hands raised halfway to the level of his shoulders. The blood was drained from his face, leaving it a pasty-yellow, and his blue eyes stared. The scalp under his sweat-matted straw-colored hair crawled.

The hanged man was sitting up! He had the carbine that Pete had laid on the ground near the tarp. His face was still gray-colored but the purplish tinge had left the skin. The head was tilted sideways and the rope had left a vivid ring of bruised skin around the muscled neck. His lips were pulled back in a wolfish grin. The incomplete hanging job had done something to his voice so that the only sound he could make was this ghoulish, croaking whisper. The placard was still pinned to his shirt.

"It's a hoss on you," he croaked. "Dug your own damn grave."

His bloodshot eyes were slits of steel gray. The wolfish grin showed big, strong white teeth. The carbine was pointed steadily at Pete's middle.

Pete's knees felt weak. His hands dropped limply and he gave a sudden unsteady laugh that he couldn't hold back. He sat down unexpectedly on the side of the trench and stared at the other man. He had expected to find Sabino when he heard the sound of a human voice. Instead it was the hanged man come to life somehow. It was like some nightmarish dream.

"You don't need that gun," Pete said, his own voice husky. "I found you strung up and I cut you down. I was goin' to bury you. Read that sign Sabino pinned to your shirt."

The slitted steel-colored eyes kept studying Pete. The rasping whisper broke the silence left by Pete's words.

"You wasn't one of 'em, that's a fact. Toss that six-shooter over here. Then tell me who sold you chips in this game. Tell it so I'll like it or you're sittin' on the edge of your own grave, young feller."

"I was ridin' along the trail when my horse spooked," Pete explained.

"It was you a-hangin' to the tree that scared 'im. I cut you down and was fixin' to roll you in your tarp and bury you. And that's all there is to it."

"You didn't have orders to plant me?"

Pete pointed to the placard. "It says that the Vigilantes will kill any man that cuts your body down and buries it. Sabino wrote that. If he ketches me here he'll kill me and you both. I just run away from the Bow and Arrow. I'm quittin' the country before Sabino kills me. I'm scared of him. I'm a damned coward. A yellow-bellied coyote. I'm scared of Sabino and I'm runnin' away from him! He'll kill me when he cuts my sign again. He's whupped all the guts I ever had plumb outa me!" Pete's voice was suddenly unsteady with alarm. He was on his feet, his arms making meaningless sort of motions, gripped by something like hysteria.

"Who are you, young feller?"

"Pete Winters."

"Floyd Mavity's my name," the hanged man said. "You keep your shirt on, Pete. Nobody's killin' you ner me. I ain't lettin' nobody that near us. I tricked 'em. None of 'em knowed how to tie a hangman's knot. That big son thought he was cuter'n hell when he handed me the rope and told me to tie my own knot. My daddy was a sailor once. He learned me how to tie every kind of a knot ever heard of. I tied this 'un so's it would ketch tight before it shut off my wind. It done the trick. They set me on a horse and quirted the horse out from under me. Directly they figgered I was dead they rode off. But they'd done tied my hands behind my back an' I couldn't work 'em loose. I'd have died if you hadn't come along. Man can't live forever a-hangin' by his

neck, even if he ain't choked plumb to death. That rope's busted somethin' inside my windpipe. Feels like there's a knife stuck in there. Can't talk no louder'n this. We'll git movin' directly."

MAVITY got to his feet, winced as he took a step, then sat down. He pulled off his boots. He wore no socks and the soles of his feet were burned black in spots, raw and blistered in other places.

"They worked on my feet with fire," he croaked, staring at the burned members with narrowed eyes. "Damn 'em! But it bought 'em nothin'." He looked up at Pete with the mirthless grin that made the boy shiver inside.

Pete must have looked scared because Mavity put down the gun and tore the placard from his chest. He read it and looked at Pete again, head twisted sideways, teeth bared.

"You ain't such a damn coward," he whispered. "You had the guts to dig a man's grave. How'd yuh like to help me hang this Sabino's hide on the fence?"

Pete nodded without speaking. Mavity dragged himself on hands and knees to the river bank and shoved his tortured feet in the cold mud. He put the carbine and six-shooter on the ground beside him and bathed his face and neck. He asked Pete for his bandanna and filled it with wet clay, making a mud poultice that he fastened around the livid rope-welt on his neck.

"Slip the hobbles off my horses," he told Pete in his rasping whisper. "Throw my saddle on the sorrel. Take the shovel and dig under the ashes of my campfire. You'll find a couple of buckskin sacks that'll weigh heavy. It's the gold them dirty sons were after. Keep your eyes peeled and your ears open. If

you hear 'em comin', slip back here and I'll show yuh how Floyd Mavity handles the deal."

Pete didn't answer. Mavity's shirt was pulled open and the boy was staring with awed fascination. Burned on Floyd Mavity's hairy chest was the Bow and Arrow brand! But it was no fresh scar. It had been burned there months or years ago. The black hair had never grown back over the Bow and Arrow brand.

CHAPTER III

FLOYD MAVITY TALKS

WITH a quick movement of his left hand, Mavity pulled the double flap of the shirt across his chest and buttoned it. For a long moment his slitted eyes glared at the gaping boy and the six-shooter in his hand was pointed up at Pete's belly. The hanged man's face was gray and twisted into a white toothed mask of bitter hatred. It looked as though he was going to shoot. Pete stood there, paralyzed by the same sort of fear that numbed him when Sabino laid hands on him.

Then Mavity lowered the gun. "Git your chores done," he ordered hoarsely. "Rattle your dew claws! Take the shovel."

Pete was glad enough to get away from this man with the Bow and Arrow brand burned on his hairy chest. He wanted to get his blue roan bronc and ride away, but he was afraid Mavity would shoot him. He saddled the sorrel horse and took the rawhide hobbles off both horses. Then he dug under the cold ashes of the campfire and found the two buckskin sacks. They bulged with the weight of gold dust and nuggets.

Mavity had taken his jackknife and ripped strips from the canvas bed tarp. He plastered the strips

thickly with mud and wrapped his burned feet in them, making improvised moccasins. He told Pete to tie his boots to his saddle and he shoved the two buckskin sacks of gold inside his flannel shirt. Then taking hold of the saddlehorn in both hands, he swung aboard the long-legged sorrel. He rode without using the stirrups, Pete's six-shooter shoved into his holster, the carbine across the saddle.

"I had me a notion to bush up here an' wait till they rode back," he told Pete when the boy had mounted. "Then I got me another notion that beat that un all to hell. I could lay in behind the brush and git every damned one of 'em before they could git outa range, but that'd be lettin' 'em off too easy. Too damn easy. I got this other notion. I'll make every last one of 'em wish they'd bin born dead. I'll deal 'em a-plenty—"

His black-whiskered, lean-jawed, hawk-beaked face twisted with pain and his hand massaged his injured throat gently. His head was tilted slightly toward his right shoulder, for he could not straighten his neck. The color of his skin was still a ghastly gray.

"If you're all right now," said Pete, when they had ridden a ways, "I'll be goin' my own trail, mister."

"My trail is your trail," Mavity told him tonelessly. "You're stringin' your bets with me. One of these nights you'll line your sights on Sabino and you'll have the guts to pull the trigger. I'll learn yuh how one lead bullet no bigger'n a goober pea kin kill big, tough meat. You're stickin' right by your new pardner, kid. Don't try to rabbit on me or I'll trip yuh up, shore as hell." The wolfish grin finished his grim threat.

Floyd Mavity took a dim, twist-

ing trail that worked back into the heart of the badlands. Dawn was breaking when they reached a little log cabin at the head of a box canyon. There was a spring of cold, clear water that tasted a little of alkali, and the grass was thick and so tall that it brushed a man's stirrups.

Pete hobbled the horses. There was grub in the cabin and a gallon demijohn of raw whiskey. Mavity kept gulping down the liquor like it was water. Pete cooked a big meal but Mavity ate hardly anything. His throat was too swollen and choked with pain. He drank whiskey and coffee and sat with his feet buried to the knees in the black mud below the spring.

There was a hot, reddish fever flush to Mavity's gray skin now and his croaking whisper mouthed ugly profanity and some of his talk made no sense to Pete. Mavity was either drunk or out of his head from pain and the torture he had been through. His talk was mostly of dead men and killings. He kept the carbine and six-shooter within easy reach and would not let Pete move out of his sight.

"Try to rabbit and I'll bust your spine with a bullet!" he kept repeating. He wanted to smoke but it burned his injured throat. He fouled the sunrise with whispered cursing. "I'll make a killer out o' you, young Pete Winters!" he grinned, his blood-shot eyes glittering as he studied the boy.

Jack Sabino had been ornery and tough, but this man Mavity was insane. His eyes glinted like those of an animal caught in a trap. White bits of froth, dry as cotton, flecked his writhing lips; and his teeth, the side teeth along his lean jaw, as pointed as a wolf's, snapped and gritted. His foul-mouthed cursing

was enough to sicken any tough man.

But since Pete had first sighted the man hanging by a rope from a cottonwood limb, it was as if his feeling of fear had reached a climax and nothing beyond that could have any effect on him. It was all unreal, and Pete felt as though he was under the spell of some nightmare that had no reality. He was numb inside and this continual threat of sudden death was losing its potency. Like a drug addict, he was building up a sort of immunity and nothing could put any more fear in him, because he had been as scared as a human being could be. Now, under this constant threat of death the drug of fear was gradually wearing off. He had already died countless deaths and he was physically incapable of being frightened any more. His system had reached its saturation point of fear. The gun barrel waving at him in constant threatening gestures was no more menacing than if this crazed man were pointing a stick at him.

MAVITY, in his ravings, had pulled his feet out of the black mud. Pete told him flatly to put his feet back in the mud and the man obeyed. Pete turned his back on the gun and went into the cabin. He came out with a wide strip of flour sack which he filled with black mud and held in his two hands.

"Hold steady and I'll fasten this around your neck," he said. "Better skin your shirt off."

Mavity put down the six-shooter and unbuttoned his shirt, pulling it off over his head. He wore no undershirt, and his thick, barrel chest with the Bow and Arrow brand scarred on it was bared. Pete had to stand behind the seated man to fasten the mud poultice. Mavity again gripped the six-shooter.

"You're just wastin' your strength wavin' that gun," Pete said, and grinned faintly at the flat calmness of his own voice in his ears. "I ain't doin' anything but tryin' to help yuh. Try drinkin' more water and not so much likker. You got a fever. Booze'll make it worse."

Mavity showed no sign of having heard him. He rubbed the barrel of the six-shooter across his scarred chest.

"Know who run that Bow and Arrow brand on my chest? *Bill Winters!*"

Pete had the two ends of the flour sack in his hand. The mud plaster sack was around Mavity's throat. Suddenly the gun barrel swung up across Mavity's left shoulder, spitting a streak of flame. Pete ducked sideways and yanked with all his might. The sack jerked Mavity's injured neck back. Pete kicked his knee against the point of the man's long jaw. Mavity's head snapped back with the swift, hard impact, then wobbled sideways. The smoking gun slid from his limp hand. Floyd Mavity had been knocked out cold.

Pete took his six-shooter and carbine and hid them in the brush near his saddle. Then he came back and examined Mavity to see if he was dead. He was a little relieved to find he hadn't killed a man, but he was uncertain what would be the wisest thing to do now.

His first impulse was to saddle Spook, take his guns and ride off before Mavity woke. He could even drive the two horses off a few miles and leave Mavity afoot. He owed this wolf-jawed man nothing. Mavity was a killer. Worse than the spurring, swaggering Sabino.

While he tried to make up his mind, Pete studied the scarred brand on the unconscious man's chest. His

own father, Bill Winters, had so branded this Floyd Mavity. *Why?*

Pete couldn't make up his mind whether or not he was scared of Mavity. His face was stinging like he had fallen into a cactus patch. The bullet had missed his head by inches and the hot powder had stung his face. He had knocked Mavity cold as a rock, maybe broken his neck or something. Anyhow, the man was too crippled to walk on his burned feet. He no longer had a gun, and Pete could keep out of his reach easily enough.

Some of Mavity's half-delirious, half-drunken whispering ravings had mentioned Sabino and Spade. He had hinted in his profane croaking that Sabino needed legal hanging. There was a mystery about this Bow and Arrow brand on his black-haired chest that linked him with Sabino and Spade and with the killing of Bill Winters.

That brand on Floyd Mavity's chest was like some challenge, some final test of Pete Winters' manhood and courage. He could not run away from it. He might be afraid of Mavity, more afraid of the wolfish, grinning killer than he had ever been afraid of Sabino. But unless he was to go on through life a miserable, slinking, gutless coward, Pete Winters knew he had to stay here and see it through.

CHAPTER IV

NIGHT RIDERS' FORAY

PETE corked the jug of whiskey and hid it. He fetched a pail from the cabin, filled it at the spring and sloshed the water into Mavity's face. He had to do this three or four times before the injured man began showing signs of life. When Mavity's bloodshot eyes blinked open and their slitted stare focused

on him, Pete stepped back out of reach and stood there, grinning faintly, the empty pail in his hand. Mavity sat up slowly. He seemed to sense that there was no longer a gun within reach. He stared hard at Pete. Finally his croaking whisper broke the tense, uneasy silence between them.

"Mebby I went a little locoed."

"You tried to kill me and I knocked you out," Pete said evenly. "I've got the guns. I'm keepin' 'em. You said Bill Winters branded you with the Bow and Arrow. Why?"

"He caught me rustlin' his cattle," Mavity rasped. "Instead of killin' me he run his Bow and Arrow on my hide and turned me loose. Cowmen used to do that sometimes along the Chisholm Trail. Still do, I reckon, when they don't want to kill a man and ain't got time to hold over a trail herd long enough to give a rustler a jury trial. Brandin' is quicker and easier. And it lasts longer. Bill Winters branded me, mebbly fifteen years ago, when he was comin' up the trail. He branded the wrong man. When I got around to it, I come to Montana to cut his sign again. I aimed to kill him where I found him, but somebody beat me to it."

"And you tried to kill me," added Pete, "because Bill Winters was my father. That it?"

"I went a little locoed," Mavity repeated. "Let it go at that. I need a shot of booze." His slitted eyes were crafty.

"Likker," said Pete, "won't help that fever none. You'll go loco again. I'm takin' no chances with you, mister. I've got the bulge on you now and I aim to keep it. I don't trust you."

"Nobody's askin' you to trust me, you young fool!" rasped Floyd Mavity. "I need whiskey. My feet's

burnt raw and my windpipe is clogged with busted bone. That kick in the jaw didn't help none. You kin hogtie me if I git wild. Keep the guns if you've got the guts to use 'em when Sabino and Spade show up here."

That last remark was a bull's-eye and Mavity grinned like some lean-jawed, snapping wolf when he saw Pete's eyes flinch under his slitted, steely scrutiny.

"You'd take to the brush like a rabbit if Sabino rode up. But you're refusin' likker to the one man that kin make a bunch quitter out o' that ornery son. Aye, and Spade, to boot. I need likker to ease off the pain. Fetch the demijohn. I'll handle the stuff easy. And one of these days it'll be Floyd Mavity that gives you back the Bow and Arrow outfit that Sabino is takin' away from you fer all the world like a growed man takin' a stick of candy away from a bawlin' kid. String your bets with me and I'll pay you back. Floyd Mavity pays his debts, good or bad."

Pete got the demijohn and set it down where the man could reach it. Mavity took a drink.

"Sabino," he said, shoving his feet in the black mud, "is goin' to be shore puzzled when he don't find my carcass hangin' to the tree. Know why he made me pull my boots on after he'd burned my feet? Because he wouldn't want the few honest ranchers that belong to the Vigilantes to know that he'd tortured a prisoner. Some of them Vigilantes don't like Sabino. They don't trust him too much. And if they git to prowlin' around they'll mebbyso find the buried carcass of the placer miner that owned that tepee and grub and blankets and the gold pan and pick and shovel. There won't be no hanged man to blame for the killin' of the prospector an' Sabino's

story of the hangin' will sound shore a mite queer. I'd give a purty to be there when Jack Sabino finds me gone."

"Then that wasn't your placer minin' outfit?"

"Hell, no. Only time I ever swung that pick and shovel was to dig a grave for the prospector that owned 'em."

"Then you killed the prospector?"

Mavity's jaws snapped shut. The crafty glitter came back into his bloodshot eyes. He grinned tantalizingly.

"The pore feller ketched hisself a mess of catfish. Choked to death on a catfish bone that got ketched in his windpipe. Where'd you put the guns?"

"Where you can't find 'em," said Pete.

"Supposin' Sabino cold-trails us here and rides up on us? You aim to let him kill us both like somethin' ketched in a deadfall trap?"

"I'll risk it," said Pete grimly. "I'm not givin' you a gun. You tried to kill me once. I've learned my lesson, Mavity."

"Mebby I was just seein' if you'd scare easy. Mebby I wanted to give you a chance to fight. Give you your first lesson, savvy? Mebby it was just a josh."

"But most mebby," Pete said flatly, "you tried to kill me because Bill Winters was my father. You got your likker, but you don't git a gun. And if you try ary tricks I'm goin' to knock you on the head with a club and ride off and leave you here."

"Sabino's coyote whelp," growled Mavity, licking his flat lips, "might turn out to be a snappin' young he-wolf yet. Take your saddle gun and climb to that high rimrock. You kin see the whole country from up yonder. Stand guard. If you sight

Pete plunged in to show the men how tough the son of Bill Winters really was.



riders, take a steady bead on the man in the lead and let 'im have it. The others will tuck their tails between their laigs and git fer home. I'll gamble that prospector's gold poke on it."

GLAD enough to be away from Floyd Mavity, Pete took his six-shooter and carbine and climbed the steep slant on foot. He spent the rest of the day up on the rimrock that gave him a panoramic view of the lower country, clear to the Missouri River and the badlands on the far side. Either Mavity or some other man had used this lookout

point before. Old cigarette butts and tobacco stains spotted the flat rock. And Pete found half a dozen empty .30-30 shells scattered around.

Floyd Mavity was as dangerous as a timber wolf with hydrophobia, Pete knew. He had as much as admitted that he had murdered the prospector. He was planning now in his warped, crafty brain how to kill Sabino and Spade and the Bow and Arrow tough hands who had strung him up and left him for dead. Mavity's grudge against Jack Sabino threw back across fifteen years or more to somewhere along the Chisholm Trail. Mavity had been

one of the cowpunchers who had started up the long cattle trail from Texas to Montana with the pool trail herd that had fetched Bill Winters and his little bunch of Bow and Arrow cattle to Montana. Mavity's croaking, half-delirious, half-drunken raving had dropped scattered and disconnected bits of information that Pete was putting together like pieces of a complicated puzzle.

This much he knew almost for certain: that Sabino, Spade and Mavity had once been partners.

"Bill Winters branded the wrong hombre!" Mavity had said. And there had been a lot behind the way he said it.

Mavity claimed that Sabino and Spade were afraid of him. Somehow, Pete knew that the man was not bragging but simply stating a grim fact. This business of throwing in with a treacherous killer like Floyd Mavity was dangerous. Almighty dangerous. But that was exactly what Pete Winters had made up his mind to do.

Down below he could see Mavity moving around. The injured man moved with painful slowness. He went into the cabin and stayed a while. Then came back to soak his burned feet in the black, rank-smelling, sulphurous mud.

Pete located the camp down on the river where Sabino and the Vigilantes had hanged Mavity. He watched some riders as they showed up there. As near as he could tell at this far distance there were ten or a dozen men in the posse. They stayed there the best part of the afternoon riding around and finally pulling out before sundown. Some of them went down the river, others took the trail that led up the river and crossed the ford to the Bow and Arrow ranch. But none of them headed this way into the badlands.

Pete came down at sunset and found Floyd Mavity half drunk. The kid's heart almost stopped beating for a minute. Mavity had a filled cartridge-belt buckled around his lean flanks and there was a cedar-handled six-shooter in the holster tied on his thigh.

"Had this smoke pole cached in the cabin," he told Pete with his tight-mouthed grin. "It and a saddle gun. I could have picked you off where you was perched up yonder if I'd had a mind to. Rustle some supper, Pete. Make a mush out o' them beans and boil some thick soup. I'm a-gittin' hungry. That black mud shore taken the burn and swellin' out o' my feet. I'll be wearin' boots in a couple days. See ar'y horsebackers on the prowl?"

The wild glitter was gone from Mavity's gray eyes and his grin was more humorous than ugly. He pointed at Pete's right hand.

Not until then did Pete realize that he had half drawn his six-shooter. He shoved the long-barreled gun back into the old holster and grinned faintly.

"You'd have gone down with that thing a-smokin'," Mavity said in his croaking whisper. "You was aimin' to gun fight me. And I'm the man that kin make a whole corral full of Sabinos take to the tall timber. Keep on a-learnin', son, and you'll do to take along."

Pete felt like whooping or laughing. He had been startled, even scared, when he saw Mavity's gun. But he hadn't weakened. He had felt none of that horrible empty numbness in the pit of his stomach. His hands were steady when he lifted a dipper of water to his mouth.

Mavity had corked his demijohn and shoved it under the bunk. He ate the bean mush and thick soup

Pete cooked and drank a lot of strong black coffee.

"You'll mebbly sleep better, Pete," he said after supper, "if you take a blanket and hide out in the brush. No reason why you should trust me after dark."

"Ain't there?" Pete looked squarely at him.

"Trust no man," advised Mavity, "and then you won't never git ketched off guard. However, you're more good to me alive than you would be dead. Sleep where you damn please. I'm bunkin' in here."

PETE took a blanket and slept near his saddle. He was dead tired, but his sleep was fitful and he kept having wild nightmares that would jerk him awake, his six-shooter in his hand. But it was not fear of Floyd Mavity that haunted his sleep. It was Sabino's big, swaggering, bullying image that kept waking him.

He was wide-awake when he saw Mavity come out of the cabin some time during the night, moving soundlessly, his feet wrapped in the mud-packed canvas moccasins. Mavity had a carbine in his hand. He detoured the brush patch where Pete had spread his blanket. Pete watched him put a hackamore on one of his two horses, remove the rawhide hobbles from the animal's forelegs and ride off bareback into the night. When he had gone Pete moved his blanket into a brush patch about fifty yards away. He dozed off with his carbine alongside him, his six-shooter in his hand.

He was up with the first streak of dawn. He washed and was getting breakfast when Mavity showed up. Mavity poured whiskey and coffee into a tin cup and gulped it down. The wolfish grin spread his flat lips.

"Who's a short, sawed-off feller

with a red mustache and an old knife scar along his face?" he asked Pete. "He's a Bow and Arrow cow-hand."

"Red. Red Webber. He was one of the night riders with Sabino. Red's ornery. Why?"

"'Cause Sabino is goin' to git spooked when he finds this Red Webber strung up where he left me hangin' the other night," Mavity explained, with grim enjoyment. "I left that same notice pinned to his belly. Only it's signed Mavity now."

CHAPTER V

COYOTE OR CURLY WOLF?

IT was plain that Mavity wasn't going to do any talking, and Pete knew better than to irritate him with questions. Mavity had evidently ridden back to that prospector's camp on the river, found Red Webber there, and hanged him with his own saddle rope. He sent Pete up to the rimrock ledge after breakfast and told him to keep his eyes peeled. Then he hobbled to the black mud-hole and, shoving his feet in the mud, lay flat on his back and went to sleep with his hat over his eyes. Pete could see him from the rimrock.

Pete watched four or five riders cross the river at the Bow and Arrow ford and ride down the river trail. The distance was too far and the brush and cottonwoods prevented him from watching their movements, but he reckoned that Sabino and his men had found Red Webber's body.

After about half an hour he could see the scattered riders moving around, up and down the river, hunting for sign. They reminded him of ants when an anthill is poked with a stick. One rider went back across the ford to the Bow and Arrow ranch. An hour or so later there

were a dozen or more riders working along the brushy river bottom land. The sun was past noon height in the sky when they bunched up and separated into two posses. They were riding now into the badlands. Pete called down to Mavity. He had to call three or four times before the man woke up.

"They're comin' up into the breaks," he yelled. "Two bunches. About six riders in each bunch!"

Mavity motioned him down and by the time Pete got to camp the man was ready to ride. While Pete was saddling up, Mavity asked him if he was still scared of Sabino and Pete answered that he didn't know for certain till he met Sabino again, but that he reckoned he was still scared as hell of the big son. There was no use in lying about it.

Mavity's hard gray eyes studied him while he talked. He gave Pete a couple of boxes of .30-30 cartridges and told him to dump them loose into his chaps pockets.

"By the time you've used 'em up kickin' dust around them brave hombres," he said, "mebbyso you'll be cured of the buck fever and you'll savvy how it feels to throw a scare into men that's called you a coyote. And like as not you'll git used to bein' shot at and missed. If you git hit it'll be your own fault. Come on."

Mavity led the way down the narrow box canyon to a point where the rocky walls rose high on either side and anyone coming into the canyon had to ride single file for a hundred yards between high rocky walls. He pointed out the dim, twisting trail that climbed one side of the canyon.

"Ride up to the top of that trail," he told Pete. "You'll find a level stretch on top. Hide your horse in the brush. Lay flat on your belly and raise your hind sight to the five-

hundred-yard notch. You kin lay your gun barrel along the rock edge and shoot the hat off a man ridin' this trail below if you're any kind of a shot. Shoot to kill or shoot to scare 'em, I don't give a damn which. I'll be acrost the canyon and I'll open up the jackpot when the sign is right. You kin see how I work and act accordin'."

Mavity's rasping whisper grated in Pete's ears and the look on the man's face made the boy's scalp tingle. Mavity rode off through the brush and out of sight. There was nothing for Pete to do but to follow the orders he had been given.

IT took nearly half an hour for Spook to climb the steep trail to where the ground flattened out and he was in a thicket of scrub pines. Pete tied the big blue roan in the brush and went on foot to the edge of a sandstone rimrock. He had hardly reached the rock when he heard the sound of men and horses below and sighted a dozen riders coming into the narrow canyon, riding single file. He thought he could recognize Sabino, riding near the tail end on the file. Spade was right in front of Sabino.

From across the canyon Floyd Mavity's carbine roared, the echoes flinging back and forth between the high walls. The rider in the lead swayed drunkenly in his saddle. His horse whirled, lunging into the horse of the second man. Then the rider pitched sideways from his saddle and landed in some brush.

A bullet struck the rimrock not six feet from where Pete lay flattened on his belly. It ricocheted off with an ugly whine and Pete's stomach seemed to shrivel into a knot. He had been shot at and missed. He lay flat on his face for a minute, then lifted his head cautiously, shoving

the end of his carbine over the edge of the rimrock.

The crashing echoes of gunfire sounded like a whole army going into action. Down below, the riders were trying to handle their scared horses. A few of them were shooting wildly. No more shots came near Pete. He had a sudden notion that Mavity had fired that first shot near him just for the hell of it. Pete forced a stiff-lipped grin, lined his sights on a rock a few yards ahead of the bunch of riders whose horses were milling confusedly, and squeezed the trigger. He saw the splattering of sandstone dust where his bullet struck. The bullet must have glanced off the rock and come close to a couple of the riders, because they ducked and jumped their horses into some brush.

Pete's grin widened. For the first time in his life he had thrown a scare into a man. It gave him a strange, exhilarating feeling of strength and power. He was not just a harmless, overgrown kid to be shoved around and sneered at; he had a gun in his hands and he was dangerous.

Those men down yonder were Sabino and Spade and the Bow and Arrow tough hands that had been hired to replace the cowpunchers Bill Winters had working for him when he was killed. All of them had treated Pete with contempt and derision and not a man among them had ever lifted a hand or reached for a gun in his defense when big Sabino beat the hell out of him. Pete hadn't a friend in that bunch of tough cowhands down below that were forking Bow and Arrow horses. Horses that rightfully belonged to him, Pete Winters.

All the rankling resentment inside the young cowboy's heart shoved fear and every other feeling aside.

He picked another rock within a dozen feet of the brush clump and shot at it. The two riders came charging out of the brush patch like they'd kicked over a hornet's nest. They headed back the way they had come. Pete dropped a shot or two in close behind them. He was in the grip now of a wild sort of nerve-tingling excitement. He got to his feet and stood, legs spread wide, lining his gun sights, pulling the trigger, working the lever of his carbine. He was shooting at rocks near the bewildered and panicky riders. Every time he pulled the trigger he saw a puff of dust kicked up by his bullet, saw men yanking their horses around and hunting shelter from his bullets. But there was no shelter. Any brush patch they went into could be sighted from above. Their only safety lay back in the direction from which they had come. Three or four of them had already turned back along the trail and quit the canyon, spurring their horses to a run.

A BULLET tore the sandstone rimrock near Pete's feet. Two more kicked sandstone dust in his face. He yelled something and took a couple of quick shots at the main bunch of riders, shooting closer to them than he'd been. Then his gun was empty and he ducked back out of sight to reload.

He took a handful of cartridges from his chaps pocket and shoved them into the magazine of his saddle gun. Bullets were spitting against the rimrock, ricocheting off at an angle with pinging, whistling, whining sounds. Sounds that tingled his scalp and made his blood pound with sheer excitement. Pete felt drunk with the danger of it.

He crawled to a new position a few yards away and took a look at

the men below. He could hear Spade's voice shouting orders and cussing, and spotted Sabino by the black hat and chaps he always wore. Sabino and three men were headed up the canyon in the direction of the hidden camp.

Pete saw a puff of gun smoke from Mavity's position across the canyon. Sabino swayed backward in his saddle. His horse was jerked around and off the trail, and Sabino was thrown heavily. Mavity shot several times in rapid order. The other three men whirled their horses and raced back the way they had come.

Spade and four men cut loose with their carbines. Pete gave a sharp cry of alarm as he saw the brush that hid Mavity thresh around. Mavity tumbled out of the brush, arms and legs flailing the air. It was a sheer twenty-five foot drop to the patch of brush where Mavity's tumbling form landed with a crash. The heavy brush hid Mavity and did not move. Spade yelled something and he and his men bombarded the brush patch in a swift, desperate rally.

Pete reckoned that Mavity must be dead. He was on his own now. There were about seven men left below. He lay flat on the rimrock and emptied his gun at Spade and the others. His bullets clipped the brush within a few feet of their heads. He reloaded swiftly and sent another rapid volley at them. Their horses were rearing and lunging and trying to bolt. Pete's third swift volley drove them out of the inadequate shelter of the buck brush, and they headed back down the canyon the way they had come. Spade, cursing and shooting wildly at the rimrock as his horse hit a run, went with his panic-driven men. Pete kept shooting at them until they were out of sight.

Three horses with empty saddles, and three men, either dead or badly wounded, were left behind. The last echoes of gunfire died out in the rock walled canyon.

Pete shouted Mavity's name several times but got no reply. He saw the black hat and black angora chaps that marked one of the three men for Sabino, crawl into the brush. The other two men were either dead or too badly wounded to move. Pete's sights were lined on the slow-crawling figure of Sabino. If he wanted to, he could kill the man easily. Instead, he let Sabino crawl to the brush.

To reach Mavity across the canyon, Pete had to pass within a few yards of the brush where Sabino had crawled. He wasn't giving himself time to get scared. He left the safety of the rimrock and started on foot down the steep trail. He kept to the brush wherever he could. The open stretches along the steep trail down into the canyon he took at a stumbling, sliding run.

But no shot broke the silence of the canyon. Sabino was either dead or he was letting Pete get closer to have a better, deadlier shot at him.

Pete slid down the last fifty feet of the steep slant. He landed, crouched, face and clothes ripped by brush, in behind a little clump of brush and rocks. He saw the black chaps move in the brush not fifty yards ahead and a little below him.

"I got you covered, Sabino!" he called out, his voice strong enough and without any tremor of fear to weaken the challenge. "Come out of there! You kin come out a-shootin' if you've got the guts to take the chance. I'm Pete Winters and I'm callin' your hand!"

"Don't shoot, Pete! I'm all shot to hell a'ready! I'm comin' out with my hands up. I throwed away my

gun. Don't murder a man, Pete!"

It wasn't Sabino's voice. Nor was it Sabino who came staggering out of the buck brush like a drunken man, hands raised, blood smearing his shirt.

CHAPTER VI

BACK TO THE BOW AND ARROW

THE man who came out of the brush was wearing Sabino's black hat and angora chaps. But it wasn't Sabino. It was the Bow and Arrow bronc twister, a loud-mouthed, horse-fighting braggart known as Blackie. He had black hair and wore a mustache like Sabino's and was about the same big, meaty build. Pete had reason enough to hate Blackie but his hatred was replaced now by a stunned sort of surprise.

"Damned if it ain't you, Pete!" said Blackie. "I thought it was some pardner of Mavity's. What you doin' with a gun, anyhow?"

"I'm killin' you with it if you don't watch out." Pete spoke flatly.

Pete's face was blood-smeared and there was a tight grin twisting his mouth. There was nothing about him now that gave any indication of weakness or cowardice. The gun in his hand was steady, his blue eyes were hard, unflinching. This was not the same young cowboy who had let Sabino slap him around.

"Don't shoot me, Pete," Blackie said quickly. "I'm a-layin' 'em down. I'm shot up bad."

"I wanted Sabino," Pete's voice held a note of genuine disappointment. "How come you're wearin' his hat and chaps?"

"Won 'em in a poker game last night."

"He let you win 'em, you sheep-brained bonehead!" croaked a whispering voice.

Pete whirled around. Floyd Mavity stepped from the brush, his six-

shooter in his right hand, his carbine in the crook of his left arm. His hat was gone and his skin and clothes were badly torn by brush. His head was tilted sideways and



his wolfish grin was uglier than ever. Blackie's arm went up as if to ward off the sight of the man he had helped hang a couple of nights before.

"I saw you git shot and fall down the side of the cliff," said Pete.

"And you played out the game lone-handed," grinned Mavity, "and done a fair to middlin' job of it, too. I'm hard to kill, eh, Blackie?"

Mavity had not been shot. He had lost his footing up at his shelter. A sandstone outcropping where he had crouched had suddenly given way and broken, sending him pitching headlong down the side of the rocky cliff. He had landed heavily in the brush and had been stunned for a little while. When he came around he had played possum and let Pete bombard Spade and his men into a wild stampede for safety.

"So Sabino pulled one of his old tricks last night and let you win the black hat and chaps," Mavity mused. "The trick worked. I wanted to take Sabino alive an' all I got was a loud-mouthed, four-flushin', would-be badman tryin' to act big like his boss. I go gunnin' for big game and what I hit is just a stinkin' skunk." Mavity turned to Pete, teeth bared in a grin.

"Git Blackie's horse and take the

ketch rope off his saddle," he told Pete. "There's a limb on that pine tree yonder stout enough to hold his weight, I reckon. We'll string him up like we hung Red Webber last night, an' leave his carcass hangin' for Sabino to look at when him and Spade and his imitation tough hombres slip up the canyon after dark some night they're drunk enough to git their nerve back. Git his horse, Pete. Blackie is settin' his saddle for the last time. Wonder if he'll beg and whine and crawl as bad as the Red feller done last night."

PETE went to get the horse. He was sort of worried. Mavity was making the big, loud-mouthed bronc peeler think that Pete had helped in the hanging of Red Webber.

Blackie's horse was quite a ways down the canyon, caught and held by the dragging bridle reins that had fouled in some brush. Pete saw the dead bodies of two of Sabino's tough hands where they lay along the narrow brush and rock-flanked trail. He was getting the bridle reins untangled when he heard Blackie's hoarse screaming. Pete mounted Blackie's Bow and Arrow horse, a half-broken three-year-old bronc, and rode back up the canyon.

Blackie lay on his back, moaning and blubbering. He was naked to the waist and his chest was covered with blood that came from a large M that had been cut across his chest from one side to the other. It was bleeding worse than the bullet hole in his shoulder. Mavity wiped the long blade of his jackknife on Blackie's chaps and grinned wolfishly at Pete.

"He begged and slobbered fit to make a man sick to his stummick, Pete. So I cut my M brand on him and let him live. We'll send him back with the latest news. I done told

him what to tell Sabino." Mavity kicked Blackie to his feet.

"Fork your horse and hit the trail before I change my mind about stretchin' your dirty neck," he ordered. "Tell it to Sabino just as I told it to you. Let 'im go, Pete. If ever you cut his sign again you kin kill him. But he's more good to us alive than he is dead, this time. Git goin', Blackie. Don't stop to look back or you'll git a hunk of lead square between your eyes!"

Blackie got on his horse and rode off at a lope, moaning with fear and pain. Mavity wiped the blood from his hands on the grass.

"Git your horse, Pete. We're movin' camp before dark. Sabino and the other half of his tough outfit will be meetin' Spade and what's left of Spade's tough hombres. Sabino will plan it to slip back after dark. There's another trail out o' this canyon that you and me will take." His whispering voice jarred into a rattling chuckle.

"I'm buildin' you the toughest rep of ary young cowhand in the country," he declared. "Spade sighted you standin' up on that rimrock. I heard him holler to his men that it was nobody but that gutless young Pete up yonder. Then you chased 'em out of the canyon like they was a pack of scared sheep. And when Blackie takes word to Sabino that Floyd Mavity ain't hung dead enough, that big spur-jinglin' son is goin' to do some real sweatin'. Blackie thinks you helped me hang Red Webber. He'll tell it scary to Sabino. The Bow and Arrow coyote whelp has shore enough turned out to be a snappin', scrappin' wolf pup that's got a taste of blood and is on the prowl. Git your horse, Pete. You and me is eatin' our next meal at the Bow and Arrow home ranch!"

FLOYD MAVITY was as good as his word. Better, in fact. They reached the Bow and Arrow ranch between midnight and dawn. Pete yanked the half-drunken cook from his bunk and when the man came out of his whiskey stupor fighting, Pete squared off and gave him a fist whipping that satisfied even the hard-bitten Mavity. Then Pete put Greasy to work cooking a midnight supper.

"I couldn't have done it if he'd bin sober," Pete told Mavity afterward.

"That's no way for a wolf to howl," rasped Mavity. "You clean his plow. If he don't cook them steaks to suit us, tie into him once more and whup him till he squawls like a drunk Injun."

"Greasy has a tough rep as a fighter," said Pete, doubt in his voice.

"You took it away from him and slapped him around with it. You handle your dukes as handy as the next man, Pete. You got good wind and you're strong and fast on your feet. All you need is practice and you're gittin' that as we travel along. Where's the Bow and Arrow remuda?"

"In the lower pasture. Sabino had all the horses fetched in from the summer range. He's fixin' to start the beef roundup next week."

"Bill Winters built up the Bow and Arrow outfit," Mavity declared flatly. "When he got killed off the spread went to his widder. She gits killed and so the Bow and Arrow iron and all the livestock in that iron, the whole damn outfit, lock, stock and barrel, belongs to nobody but the only son and heir of Bill Winters. That's you, Pete. Reckon you got guts enough now to run your own roundup wagon?"

Pete looked doubtful. "I got to

have cowpunchers that'll—"

"Hire the men Sabino fired after Bill Winters got killed," Mavity interrupted. "Pay 'em fightin' wages. Sabino's bin makin' it tough on the reps from other cow outfits that the owners send to represent their irons at the roundups. Send word to them outfits that Sabino ain't workin' for the Bow and Arrow no more, an' them outfits will send reps that'll do to take along. They'll be packin' saddle guns along with their ketch ropes. You've gone this far, Pete. You've declared yourself a tough hand. Play your string out. I'll stand at your back till your belly's caved in."

They were wolfing down a big meal, Mavity making out on soft grub like spuds and beans and hash because his throat was still too tender to swallow even a tender steak. When they were finished, Mavity ran the cook off the ranch. The half-sobered and battered Greasy lost no time going when he learned that Pete's whispering partner was none other than Floyd Mavity, the man he had heard Sabino say they had hung the other night.

"Hit the river, you sorry excuse for a grub spoiler!" Mavity told him. "You'll find Sabino on yonder side of the Missouri. Tell him that young Pete Winters has turned wolf and is ramroddin' his own Bow and Arrow outfit, with Floyd Mavity for a wagon boss. Tell him whenever he feels lucky to fetch his would-be tough hands and try to take the outfit away from Pete. But he better have his gun in his hand when he tops the sky line. Now hit the water, you greasy pot rassler. It'll be the first bath you've ever taken."

"I can't swim!" Greasy howled.

"Then drown!"

Mavity pushed the cook over the ten-foot bank into the black water.

There followed the sound of frantic splashing and choked sputtering as Greasy's arms flailed the water with threshing movements. They could see his head above the moonlit surface of the river. Pete threw him a stick of cordwood. Greasy grabbed it and clung to it with a desperate grip. The swift current quickly bore him downstream and out of sight. Pete told Mavity that the current would land Greasy safe enough on the island about a quarter mile below. Mavity nodded and grinned. Greasy was ornery and the scare would sober him up and maybe help his cranky, bullying nature.

Pete and Mavity rounded up the lower pasture and corraled the remuda. They did not bother with mess wagon or bed wagon, but packed half a dozen horses with grub, corral ropes, stakes, shoeing outfit and branding irons. They threw the pack horses in with the remuda and pulled out.

They traveled fast, taking the roundup trail south. The Bow and Arrow was running a pack outfit roundup this Fall. Mavity made Pete feel like a man. He was throwing the boy into a real man's job and treating him like he was actually capable of handling it.

Sabino and his men had been set afoot save for the played-out, leg-weary mounts they would be riding back to the Bow and Arrow some time before noon, when they had combed the box-canyon hide-out and made certain that Mavity and Pete had gotten away.

When Pete said something about the law being on Sabino's side because Sabino was his legal guardian, Mavity's rasping, croaking laugh gave him his answer.

"You're free, white, and kin handle a gun and your fists," he de-

clared. "That's the only law that counts in the Montana badlands. Guardeen, hell!"

Pete and Mavity pushed hard, changing horses when they needed a fresh mount, keeping the remuda and pack horses going at a long trot. By the time Sabino discovered that the remuda was gone, they would be forty miles from the Bow and Arrow ranch.

CHAPTER VII

PETE HIRES A CREW

IT was no more than an hour past noon when they camped on Bull Creek at the head of the badlands. Mavity stayed at camp while Pete saddled a fresh horse and headed for Landusky at a long trot. There would be cowpunchers hanging around town waiting for the roundups to start, and most of the old Bow and Arrow cowpunchers would be in town as well. They had good reasons for hating Sabino and Spade. Pete meant to give them a chance to prove their loyalty to dead Bill Winters.

Pete rode into Landusky and left his horse at the hitch rack in front of Pike Landusky's saloon. There were more than a dozen cowpunchers inside the saloon. Pike and his peg-legged partner, Jake, were giving credit to every cowboy who had a job coming up in a few days with any of the several big cow outfits near the Little Rockies. They were putting on a final celebration before the beef work started.

Pete knew most of them. They knew him. They all knew Sabino. All of them had known Bill Winters. Pete drank a glass of beer and broke his news to them. He spoke directly to the several cowhands who had worked for the Bow and Arrow until Jack Sabino fired them, but every

man in the place heard what he said.

"I've split with Sabino," he told them. "I'm ramroddin' my own outfit from now on. I've got the remuda and a pack spread camped at the roundup crossin' on Bull Crick. I need a full crew of cowpunchers that ain't scared of Sabino and his bunch of night riders. I'll pay fightin' wages, and like as not you'll have to earn your pay. I want all the men I kin git holt of. I'd like to hire back all the men Sabino fired. And I want reps from every outfit around the Bow and Arrow range. How about it?"

There was a long moment of complete silence as they absorbed all he had said. Pete was uncomfortable under their appraising scrutiny. He knew that he had been branded as a coward and he had no real proof to show them that he was not still scared of Sabino. He felt young-looking and he knew how weak his words must sound to these older men who thought of him as a bald-faced kid Sabino had been kicking around like a chore boy at the ranch.

He was about to tell them that there was one tough hand who was backing his play. But he saw a reward dodger tacked to the log wall of the saloon. His eyes read the bold, black lettering:

ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD,
FOR THE CAPTURE OF FLOYD MAV-
ITY, DEAD OR ALIVE, WANTED FOR
CATTLE RUSTLING AND MURDER

Pete's eyes came away from the reward dodger. He couldn't mention Mavity's name now. He had to stand on his own two feet. The blood drained from his bruised face, leaving it white under its tanned skin. But his blue eyes had a steely hardness and his voice a harsh, bitter

edge, when he broke the silence.

"I know what you're all thinkin'. That I'm a big, overgrown, bald-faced button that couldn't run even a sheep outfit. You've heard Sabino tell how he kicked me around, and he told the truth. He had the fear knocked into me and no mistake. Mebby I'm still scared of him. I'll soon be findin' out. I stole the remuda out o' the horse pasture last night while Sabino and his men was huntin' for me on the south side of the river in the badlands. I might turn yellow when he shows up to take the outfit away from me. But you'll have to take my word for this much: that he'll have to kill me to git back the outfit he's bin tryin' to steal from me. Even if I am a gutless coyote, I'm fightin' Sabino. An' I ain't the only man in this saloon that Sabino has whipped."

The grin on Pete's face was tight-lipped, desperate. These men wanted proof that he was not a coward. He'd give it to 'em! He took a step toward a tall, slim cowpuncher in his late twenties.

"I saw Sabino run you off the ranch like you was a lousy sheepherder. He told you he'd double a rope and whup you to death if he ketched you on the Bow and Arrow range. That's what's holdin' you back from wantin' any of the fightin' pay, ain't it?"

THE puncher's face turned a brick red. He came at Pete with fists swinging. Pete met the attack and went in with lowered head, punching wildly, desperately. They met with a jarring thud that would have thrown them both off balance if they hadn't clinched. They stood swaying there in the middle of the saloon, muscles straining. The tall cowboy's long leg tripped Pete, their spurs locking. Pete went over back-

ward, the cowboy falling on top of him. Pete twisted sideways, his arm looped now around the other man's neck. They rolled over and over, legs threshing, arms gripping one another.

Neither Pete nor the cowboy who was called Slim knew much about fist fighting or real wrestling. They were using schoolboy tactics and depending on their strength and luck more than on any real skill. Few cowpunchers had any ring science. For the most part their fights were settled by clumsy, give-and-take, knock-down decisions when the loser got knocked cold or hollered that he had enough. Or they fought with guns.

The older cowpunchers gave the two of them room. They grinned at one another and called out unheeded advice. Pike and his peg-legged partner, Jake, who used a shotgun for a crutch, were both behind the bar. They hauled bottles and glasses off the bar out of reach of anyone getting overenthusiastic. Fights that started like this usually ended in a free-for-all battle with the onlookers taking sides and using it as an excuse to settle old grudges between themselves. More than often there was a shooting scrape of some sort before the air cleared again.

But this time nobody was taking sides. They were cheering one, then the other, of the young scrappers. They were curious to see how tough this son of Bill Winters really was.

Pete had the taste of fresh blood in his mouth again. He had tasted it before when Sabino's fists smashed into his face and it had always made him feel sort of sick and weak-muscled. But he spat the blood through clenched teeth and fought all the harder, jabbing at Slim's face with the one fist he had free. He landed a short, jerky punch that

connected with Slim's nose. Blood spurted from the smashed nose. Pete grinned and hardly felt the thud of Slim's hard fist in his ribs. He was underneath again and one of his legs was free and kicking. His spur rowel caught Slim high up on the thigh. Slim grunted with pain. Pete raked him viciously with his spur and Slim let out a sharp yelp as the spur rowel raked across his long, lean back. His grip on Pete's neck loosened. Pete raked him a third time. Somebody was whooping:

"Spur 'im, cowboy! Roll 'im over an' ride 'im like yuh owned 'im!"

Pete scrambled to his feet. Slim was up at the same time and they stood on wide-spread, none-too-steady legs and swung at each other. Toe to toe. Blood spurting. Swinging wild and fast. Now and then landing a solid blow. But mostly their fists glanced off the other's shoulder or ducked head. The older cowpunchers gave advice and most of it was hoorawing.

"Gouge 'im, Pete! Gouge 'is eye out!"

"Chaw an ear off 'im, Slim!"

"Whittle 'im down with a barlow!"

"Give 'em each a quirt!"

PETE'S wind was going fast. Sweat dripped into his eyes. His arms were tiring. Slim's blows were making his head feel dizzy. He kept missing his punches.

Slim, too, was gasping for breath and his long legs were getting wab-bly and his ears were filled with clogged sounds like a million bees buzzing inside his head. He could not see Pete's face clearly any more. Everything was getting blurred.

But they kept on fighting. Swinging, stumbling, missing. Getting weaker every second. Knees weak. Fists like leaden weights that were getting too heavy to lift. They stum-

bled into each other, clinched, went down with a crashing thud. Then Pete's head struck the corner of the bar and everything went black.

He was in a chair and Jake was sopping his face with a wet towel when he came awake.

Slim was in another of the heavy barroom armchairs and Pike Landusky was working on him with a similar wet towel. The cowpunchers had drinks in their hands and were grinning and making remarks.

Pete looked at Slim and forced a grin. Slim's battered lips grinned back at him.

"You hired one man, anyhow, Pete," Slim said, and spat out some blood on the sawdust-covered floor.

"You hired you a whole crew," Jake amended. He shoved a drink of whiskey into Pete's skinned-knuckle hand.

"You got a right, Pete," said one grizzled cowpuncher who had worked for the Bow and Arrow when Bill Winters was alive, "to let your spurs out to the town hole and drag 'em noisy. You're a chip off the old block. The spittin' image of Bill Winters. Though I never taken notice of the likeness till today."

There were two reps from the Bear Paw Pool in the saloon and a Circle C man. Another man representing the Circle Diamond had just drifted into town with his laden bed horse and string of cow ponies. A couple of punchers from the Square and the Long X were somewhere in town waiting for the Bow and Arrow roundup wagon to start work.

"You shore won't be workin' short-handed if you got enough horses in your cavy to mount 'em," Pike Landusky told Pete.

Pike and Jake had declared the fight a draw. The decision met with unanimous approval. There was a round or two of free drinks. Then

the men went down the street to the feed barn to pack their bed horses and saddle up their private mounts.

"Anybody that ain't got a saddle gun," Pete told them at the barn, "kit git one at Pike's store. And the guns and ca'tridges is charged to the Bow and Arrow outfit."

Twenty-three men, counting the six reps, with their strings of horses, rode to the Bow and Arrow camp at the roundup crossing on Bull Creek.

CHAPTER VIII

TROUBLE ON THE ROUNDUP

FLOYD MAVITY had the rope horse corral up and dutch ovens filled with grub and was cooking over the fire when Pete and his crew rode in. Mavity had butchered a fat yearling and was wearing a flour-sack apron as he lifted dutch-oven lids with a long pothook. He was wearing his boots for the first time and was hobbling around stiffly, limping on both feet.

Mavity's cold gray eyes studied every man who rode up. Out of the whole crew only two men knew him, the Circle C rep and Lon Hutchins, one of the old Bow and Arrow cowhands. The latter stiffened, his hand on his gun.

"Take 'er easy," said Mavity in his croaking whisper. "Me 'n' Pete Winters is pardners."

"And Bill Winters put you into the Bow and Arrow iron a long time ago—" Lon Hutchins began.

Pete stepped in between the two men. "Mavity's the best friend and only pardner I ever had. He's ram-roddin' the—"

"You're roddin' your own spread," cut in Mavity. "I'm just the biscuit builder around here. But Pete's right, Lon. I'm the only friend he had in a tight place when he needed one almighty bad. You gents that

knowned Bill Winters and owed him a-plenty, one way or another, was a long ways out o' gun range when Sabino was crowdin' Bill Winters' son off his home range."

The Circle C rep had drawn close and was listening to the rasping voice.

"I owe Bill Winters nothin' but a bad grudge. But Pete here saved my life and I'm sidin' the boy all the way down the line, regardless. Bill Winters ran the Bow and Arrow on the wrong man down on the ol' Trail. I'll prove that if my luck don't peter out, mister. I rode with you once, Lon. I'm ridin' with you again. I'm not beggin' no man's friendship but I'll git along with you or ary other man as long as it'll help Pete here

whup the hell out o' Sabino and Spade. That goes as she lays, Lon Hutchins."

"Yesterday there was a Bow and Arrow man in Landusky that claimed Sabino and the fellers he calls Vigilantes strung you up," Hutchins said slowly. "Sabino sent word that he was fetchin' your carcass to Landusky and takin' it to Chinook, to claim the thousand-dollar bounty on your hide."

"Sabino's rope slipped," grinned Mavity. "Pete here slipped 'er off my neck. Where do you and me stand, Lon?"

Lon Hutchins tugged at his drooping gray mustache. He held out his hand.

"We stand where we did the day



"I'm comin' at you, Sabino!" Pete yelled.
"Comin' to kill you!"

that pool herd started across the Staked Plains down in Texas, Mavity. Before Bill Winters branded you by mistake."

"There's a reward dodger at Landusky," Pete told Mavity, "offering a thousand dollars dead or alive—"

Mavity nodded. "Like as not Sabino paid for the printin'." He told Pete and Lon Hutchins and the Circle C rep cynically that any time somebody felt lucky about trying to make an easy thousand, it was a wide-open game.

"There's no need of anybody knowin' his name is Mavity," Pete told them.

"Not from me, they won't read his brand," said Lon Hutchins. Mavity hadn't seemed to notice his proffered hand and the grizzled cowpuncher had scowled and dropped it a little awkwardly to reach for his cigarette makings.

The Circle C rep said he was no bounty hunter and that any man who would try it on was lower than a rattlesnake's belly. That he never had won any prizes at school for talking out of turn.

But by the time the cook and horse wrangler Pete had hired in town got to camp that evening, everyone in the outfit knew that the man with the kinked neck and whispering voice was Floyd Mavity, an outlaw from Texas. And some of them remembered that when Bill Winters had been bushwhacked and killed, Sabino had mentioned Floyd Mavity as the worst enemy Bill had and had said that mebbysso Mavity and some of his outlaw pardners had done the job. Mavity was treated with a noticeable coldness which he himself did nothing to dissipate by refusing to drink from the one or two town bottles that had been fetched to camp. It was the Circle C rep who gave Mavity the nickname

of Speak Easy on account of his whispering voice. The nickname stuck.

THERE was no beef herd to hold the first night. Pete made out a list of names and announced he was putting on a horse guard. Two hour watches and five men on each guard. They needed no orders from Pete to tell them how to use their guns in case Sabino and his night riders showed up.

Mavity told Pete that Sabino wouldn't be making any play till he was certain that the sign was right. Sabino was too wary to make any bold stab. He'd wait until he had all the odds in his favor, until he knew how many men Pete had and how tough they were. Then he'd work a trick of some kind.

"He'll come an Injun trick some night when he figgers the sign is right," declared Mavity.

Sabino would be needing fresh horses right now. He'd have to buy, borrow or steal horses to mount his night riders.

Mavity went on guard with Pete and they rode around the grazing remuda that they kept close herded. They had strapped bells around the necks of the leaders who might stray off. Each string of rep horses had a bell horse because they would be trying for the first few nights to pull out for their home range.

"I hear you picked the Slim feller and fought him like you meant it, Pete," whispered Mavity, grinning. "Showed your wolf fangs. You'll be whittlin' notches on your gun, next. When Sabino gits out a reward dodger with your name on it, then you kin call yourself a tough hand."

Pete thought Mavity was just hoorawing him and let it go at that. But Mavity was not joshing. The wolfish outlaw from Texas knew

more about Sabino and his ways than Pete would ever learn. Mavity and Sabino and Spade had been raised in the same part of Texas, down along the Pecos. Mavity was well aware that Sabino was playing for big stakes. He was after the Bow and Arrow outfit and he aimed to get it as legally as he knew how. After all, there was no use in getting the layout if he couldn't hold it according to the law. Therefore, Sabino wasn't going to start a gun war without having the law to back every play he made.

Jack Sabino was as foxy as they come. He had used the killing of Bill Winters as a good excuse to organize a band of Vigilantes with the sanction of the laws of Montana. Law-abiding, honest-minded men like Judge Miles and the sheriff at Chinook had listened to his convincing plea that he needed a Vigilante force to keep the cattle rustlers from stealing the Bow and Arrow cattle from the Widow Winters. And if he used the Vigilantes, who were mostly his hired hands, to wipe out personal grudges, Sabino did so cautiously. Old enemies like Mavity were outlawed and a price was put on their head. Sabino used Bow and Arrow money to back the reward dodgers' offers of high bounty.

Mavity was an outlaw and could be legally hunted down and shot or hanged. Now Pete was riding mighty high-handed and if he didn't ease up he would be riding across that invisible law line and over a blind cutbank. Sabino had been appointed Pete Winters' legal guardian and when it came to cold facts, Sabino was the kid's stepfather. Since Pete's mother had made out no last will before her untimely death, Sabino, as her legally widowed husband, was entitled to a large portion of her estate. That was all accord-

ing to law. Black and white. Cut and dried.

Why should Sabino risk losing his chance of owning the big Bow and Arrow cow outfit by making some fool gun play, when all he had to do was ride to Chinook and lay cold facts before Judge Miles and get legal sanction from the court to reclaim the Bow and Arrow remuda and all the power that went with the horse cavvy?

THE BOW AND ARROW roundup had been working nearly a week. There had been no sign of Sabino and his night riders. Lon Hutchins and the majority of the other cowpunchers were beginning to believe that Sabino was licked, that he was quitting. They got a little careless about packing saddle guns that were more or less of an awkward nuisance when they were working cattle. They would leave their carbines at camp when they rode circle of a morning and worked the hold-up in early afternoon, cutting out beef steers and branding calves that had been missed on the spring roundup. But mostly they packed saddle guns when they stood guard at night around the beef herd or remuda.

Pete kept up the practice of putting men on night guard to help the nighthawk hold the remuda. But the guard had to be cut down to two men, because he had a beef herd to hold now and he had to put two men on beef-guard shifts of two-hour watches. Every man in the outfit but the cook and horse wrangler was standing a two-hour guard at night. Horse guard or beef guard. Some of the men got a little sullen about it. And they were beginning to grumble among themselves that it was Mavity, not Pete Winters, who was actually ramroddin the

Bow and Arrow. And Mavity was a Texas outlaw with a bad rep.

A few more men had come to rep with the outfit. They had come from down along the Missouri River near the Bow and Arrow home ranch. They fetched with them the story of Red Webber's hanging and the killing of two other Bow and Arrow men in Floyd Mavity's box-canyon hide-out and told of the prospector who had been murdered and his gold cache lifted. Mavity was supposed to have done that murder and to have the gold, either in his warsack or cached somewhere in the badlands. They told how Mavity had carved his M brand on the chest of a Bow and Arrow cowpuncher who was now in the hospital at Chinook with a slim chance of living.

And with all these stories was the rumor that Pete Winters had helped Mavity hang Red Webber and whittle on Blackie. That Pete had whipped Greasy, the cook, while Mavity stood there with a six-shooter in his hand to see that Pete didn't get the worst of it. That the two of them had thrown Greasy in the river to drown, and it was no fault of theirs that Greasy had been lucky enough to grab a log and float down to the island, where he had been until Sabino went over with a rowboat and took him off.

Three of these new reps were river ranchers and honest, or at least fairly honest, members of the Vigilantes. They mistrusted Pete and showed it. They had come to the outfit to protect their own interests and not to mix in any fight against Sabino. They made their feelings plain and they did a lot of quiet and covert talking when Pete and Mavity were not around camp to overhear them.

"Them river reps," Lon Hutchins told Mavity and Pete, "is goin' to

make trouble fer you, Mavity."

"Trouble is just somethin' else I was raised on," the outlaw from Texas grinned wolfishly.

SLIM, too, warned Pete. They had become good friends, and Slim was loyal through and through. But he had the good sense not to run off at the head about it and he made a good listener. The river reps talked to Slim as they had heard that Pete and he had had a fight. Slim's nose had been broken and was still swollen and knitting crooked with a lump on its high-bridged bone.

"Sabino pulled out for Chinook, Pete," Slim reported. "Them river rats let it slip. He's gone to git himself a deputy badge and a bench warrant swore out for your arrest."

"I'll be easy to find when he comes to serve it," said Pete, feeling more of a man than he had ever hoped he would be capable of feeling. He slapped the cedar butt of the six-shooter that Bill Winters had once carried in that same old worn holster.

"Sabino won't come alone, Pete. He'll have a posse with him."

"I'm payin' all you men fightin' wages, ain't I?"

"Shore thing, Pete. I ain't goin' to rabbit on yuh. Neither is Lon Hutchins or some of the old-time Bow and Arrow men. But there's some that won't fire a shot if Sabino is wearin' a law badge. Them river rats has bin tellin' it scary about you an' Speak Easy Mavity. Hell, Pete, Sabino is accusin' you of helpin' Mavity hang Red Webber, and tryin' to drown Greasy in the river at night after you'd beat him unconscious. It'll be a charge of murder on the bench warrant, Pete!"

"I wonder," grinned Pete, "how much reward will be offered on the printed dodger?"

Pete told Mavity what Slim had told him. Mavity nodded as much as his stiff neck permitted. His pointed side teeth showed as his lips flattened back.

"Sabino hasn't got the guts to fight like a man. He's got to have somethin' like a law badge to hide behind. Sabino is my bear meat, Pete. And a law badge never was made that was big enough to make a man bullet-proof. I got a ca'tridge with Jack Sabino's name on it an' another that wears Spade's brand. I've packed 'em a long ways and for a long time."

Mavity told Pete to get Lon Hutchins to tell him some time the story that he, Mavity, had told Lon the night before on horse guard.

"Lon didn't offer to shake hands again," grinned Mavity. "But he'll tell you I wasn't lyin' none when I said my say-so. Me 'n' Lon never was friends and never will be. But what he feels to'rds me is shore enough brotherly love compared to what that tough ol' Texican thinks of Sabino and Spade."

Pete tackled Lon later about it but Lon said there wasn't no use in him telling Pete the story till the time come right. But, as for him, if ever he lined his gun sights on Sabino or Spade, he'd pull the trigger and ask 'em afterwards if Mavity had told the truth.

"Mavity's the coldest-blooded hombre that ever I knew, son," declared Hutchins. "But he ain't a liar. Not about big things where the real truth counts. Mavity will grin like a damned wolf when he gut-shoots a man. But when the truth is needed his word is as good as a preacher's Bible gospel."

The other cowpunchers were drawing away from Speak Easy Mavity more and more. All but Lon and Slim and the other cowhands

who had worked for Bill Winters. They would have been friendly if Mavity had let them. But the whispering outlaw kept apart from them all. And he never let Pete out of his sight.

CHAPTER IX

NIGHT RIDERS PROWL

MAVITY was not letting Pete Winters ride anywhere alone, day or night. And that was the one thing that kept Jack Sabino's plan from working out smoothly in every last detail. Because it was a well-thought-out plan that was a mixture of foxlike cunning and wolf-prowling boldness. And it worked out, right up until that last and important detail, with as neat a pattern as ever a Navaho worked into the design of a blanket. It was Mavity's wolfish suspicion and caution and his constant siding of Pete that ruined the pattern. But, even so, it threw Pete and him into a bad tight and if there was any weakness in Pete Winters, that was the test that would prove it.

Pete had spent a lot of time working out his two guard lists. One for the beef herd, the other for the remuda. There were four reps from down along the Missouri River that he did not trust. He and Mavity had so split them that no two stood guard at the same time. That seemed a sound and safe plan. It turned out to be poison, because it worked right in with Sabino's plan to take over the Bow and Arrow roundup outfit. Not in one swift, gun-roaring raid. But quietly, under the cover of a moonless night, one man at a time. Sabina was favored even by nature that gave him the dark of the moon to hide his stealthy movements.

There was no mess tent or bed tent. The men slept out in the open

and their night horses were staked near where they spread their tarp and blankets at nightfall.

First guard began at eight o'clock at night. Two men rode out to the beef herd, two others rode out to where the nighthawk was grazing his remuda.

At a few minutes before ten o'clock, second guard time, one of the men on beef guard and one of the men on horse guard rode back to camp half a mile or so away. They would wake the two relief men who would ride out and relieve the one man left on guard at the beef herd and the one man who was still out helping the nighthawk hold his remuda of saddle horses.

Pete had put a river rep on both first guards. Those were the two men who rode in a few minutes before ten to wake the second guard for the beef herd and horse cavvy guards. They knew where to locate the beds of the men they wanted to wake without disturbing any of the other sleeping cowpunchers.

There was one river rep and a Bear Paw Pool rep on second beef guard, and a regular Bow and Arrow, cowpuncher and a river rep.

This particular night was dark. It was hard to tell one man from another. The Pool rep rode out with the River rep to the beef herd. They found the herd and split up, one riding in each direction. The Bear Paw Pool man met a rider. They stopped.

"I'll take the guard watch," said the Pool man. "Go to camp and grab your slumber, cowboy."

The man on guard had a six-shooter in his hand. He rode close and shoved the end of it in the small of the Bear Paw Pool man's back.

"Don't make a fight of it or this gun will go off in your back!" he warned.

It was Sabino's voice and it had

an ugly, sinister sound. There was nothing for the Pool rep to do but let himself be taken prisoner by the two riders who loomed up as if they had popped out of the ground. They



tied a gag in the prisoner's mouth and took his guns and led his horse over to a cut-coulee half a mile farther on, where the man who had gone on first guard with the river rep was sitting on the ground with his hands and feet tied and a gag in his mouth. A pair of Sabino's tough hands were standing guard over him.

THE same thing was happening over where the remuda grazed quietly in a long draw. Spade was taking prisoners over there with the aid of the river rep and a couple of Sabino's tough hands to help him get the job done neatly and quietly.

The same two river reps were riding to camp each time to call the men on next guard. It happened at midnight when they called third guard. It happened again with the mechanical precision of clockwork when last guard was called at two o'clock in the morning, the same two river reps calling the relief guard.

Pete was on this last beef guard. He always went on last guard and came into camp after the herd was on its feet and grazing off the bed ground. He would come in while his cowpunchers were roping out their circle horses for the morning, and he would send out the men slated on his list for day herd duty.

The river reps who had thrown in with Sabino told him to expect Pete at two o'clock in the morning when he went on last guard—Pete and Lon Hutchins.

Mavity had been going out on last horse guard and fetching in the remuda at a little before four for the men to catch their morning horses. Mavity and Slim were booked to be called for last horse guard. The nighthawk had been tied up with the other prisoners. Spade and two of Sabino's tough hands were waiting out at the remuda to kill Mavity and handle Slim. Spade would know Mavity in the dark because of his whispering voice.

Pete roused from his sleep quickly, before the man calling him to go on guard had gotten near enough to pull back his tarp and blankets and tell him it was last guard time. Pete was sleeping lightly these nights. Mavity's bed was not more than ten feet away and his slumber was even lighter and more restless than Pete's. So that they were awake and pulling on their boots and pants by the time the two river reps got near enough to them in the black night to touch either of them.

"Your guard, Pete," said the river man who had ridden in from the beef herd. He purposely muffled his voice because he was not supposed to be on third guard. The man waking Pete should be the Circle C rep.

"How they layin'?" asked Pete, his customary question regarding the bedded beef herd.

"Layin' good," muttered the man, his spurs jingling in the darkness as he started moving away.

"Horse guard, Speak Easy," sounded the muttered voice of the other river rep who also had no business on third guard. He headed for Slim's bed a little ways off toward the horse corral.

Pete was awake, but sleep still fogged his senses a little. He was buckling on his six-shooter when the vague notion that something was not quite right broke through that film of sleepiness.

Instantly, then, he knew what it was that didn't sound right. The Circle C rep, when Pete voiced his half-asleep question, "How they layin'?" always gave him the same hoorawing answer:

"Whole damn herd stampeded and there's nothin' left on the bed ground but busted horns and some dead and crippled steers," he'd say.

Pete stood on his legs, tense, listening. He heard the man waking Lon Hutchins, who was a heavy sleeper.

"Your guard, Lon. Last guard."

Lon's sleepy voice cussed softly.

Always the Circle C man would yank tarp and blankets from Lon's head and josh the old cowpuncher a little.

"Makes a man wonder what he done with his summer wages, don't it? Why don't you git a town job tendin' bar and sleepin' daytimes?" the Circle C rep would invariably tell the grizzled Lon, who hated to crawl out from under the blankets in the middle of the night.

The other river rep was waking Slim. "Last guard, Slim. Roll out."

Mavity's spurs tinkled softly. He came toward Pete in the darkness. His whispering voice sounded.

"I'm goin' out with you, Pete. Slim an' Lon kin take the horse guard."

"That wasn't the Circle C rep that called me," said Pete, his voice pitched low. "And it wasn't Shorty that come in off horse guard. There's a nigger in the woodpile."

"Makes two niggers. And yonder they stand, with their horses. One apiece. No shootin'. We got to act

natural. Bend a gun barrel acrost your hombre's head and don't be scared of hittin' too hard."

PETE and Mavity talked to each other carelessly as they approached the two men. Pete took his cue from Mavity. The two men could hear clearly enough.

"If we're movin' camp, Pete, bettel tell these two gents what you want 'em to do," Mavity said.

Pete's nerves were taut and he tried to make his voice sound casual.

"We'll move over to the forks of Second Crick. Make a long circle and hold up the drives on the greasewood flat to the west."

The two men were uneasy. Mavity and Pete sensed it at just about the same time. Mavity's whispered voice rasped with a louder harshness:

"Hands up or we'll shoot your bellies off!"

Pete's gun was in his hand. He expected to use it when his thumb pulled back the hammer. But the two river men were scared of Mavity. They had seen the hanged body of Red Webber. There was no fight in them, and they showed it right now.

"Don't shoot, Mavity!" one of them pleaded. "Our hands is up! Don't!"

"Couple of the river rats," rasped Mavity. "What's your sneakin' game, hombres? Talk fast and talk straight!"

They talked. They said that the law was out yonder. Sabino and Spade were special deputies. They had taken every man in camp but Pete, Mavity, Slim and Lon Hutchins. The cook and horse wrangler didn't count. Sabino was holding the beef herd and waiting to kill Pete. Spade had the remuda and aimed to kill Mavity.

"And you're the pair of snakes that's helpin' Sabino pull the trick!" rasped Mavity.

Pete was afraid Mavity would kill the pair. He told the outlaw to go easy. They didn't want any more murder charges against them. Mavity's attempt at laughter was a grisly rattle in his injured throat.

"We're usin' 'em to bait our trap, Pete. If they git killed it is just their own fault and we're sheddin' no salty tears."

Slim and Lon came up, their hands on their guns. Mavity told them that Pete had smelled skunk when he woke up and they had two here in the trap. Lon said not to kill the big un because he had a squaw wife and two, three 'breed kids. The other un, he allowed, didn't matter so much because he was knot-headed and ornery anyhow.

Mavity asked which of them had come from the remuda and the squaw man said he was the one.

"Then we don't need the knot head," rasped Mavity. His gun barrel thudded against the man's head and the stricken man dropped in a motionless heap on the ground. It was cold-blooded and brutal and it made Pete a little sick inside.

"Hogtie 'im, Lon," whispered Mavity. "Though like as not he's too dead, anyhow, to need wrappin' up." He poked the barrel of his gun in the squaw man's ribs. The darkness hid the wolfish grin Pete knew was stretching back his flat lips.

"You, mister squaw man with three, four kids, you willin' to take orders and not double-cross us? You know what happened to Red Webber. We'll swing you up to your own tree for your squaw and kids to look at if you try to fox us. Sabino and Spade won't be alive to do you any

good and that's a cinch bet. You playin' on our side now?"

"I won't double-cross you, Mavity! So help me, I won't!"

"You'll hang with a brand burned on your belly if you do," Mavity's whisper warned him.

"Ride back to the remuda. Tell Spade that me and Pete rode out to the beef herd together and Sabino and his tough hombres knocked us in the head and taken us prisoners. That Sabino said for Spade to git over to the beef herd as fast as he could git there. That Sabino said he ain't takin' care of Mavity alone. Spade will savvy what that means. Kin you do that without double-crossin' us?"

"I'll do it, Mavity, so help me!"

"Lon, you and Slim cold-trail the squaw man, and if he tries any tricks kill him and Spade both, and cut down any of Sabino's men that try to horn into the game. Make the squaw man talk low when he tells it to Spade. Me and Pete will take care of Sabino and Spade when we find 'em out yonder. Git goin'."

"Just the two of you tacklin' Sabino and Spade, Mavity?" Lon's voice sounded worried.

"Sabino and Spade and what loose gun slingers they got out there to side 'em," Mavity said. "Rattle your hocks, squaw man. Lon, you and Slim trail him but not too close. Try not to shoot no horses. Let's git goin', Pete!"

CHAPTER X

CURLY WOLF HOWLS

WHEN he and Pete had covered about two thirds of the distance to the bedded beef herd, Mavity pulled up.

"We'll give Spade time to git started good. How you feelin', Pete?"

"Scared stiff," Pete replied.

"Not nowhere scared as bad as you think. Any man'd feel jumpy in this kind of a play. I feel the same way and this is an old story. By the way, I give Lon that sack of placer gold to keep for me. It's his if anything happens to me. Did Lon tell you what I told him?"

"No. He said he'd tell me some other time."

"Lon's a good man to take along. He didn't want me 'n' you to fall out. Here's the story in a few words."

Pete sat his horse listening as Mavity's whispering voice went on:

"Me'n Sabino and Spade started with the pool herd Bill Winters left Texas with. Sabino cooked up the idee to steal the herd. Him and Spade was in it deeper than me. I was hired out to Sabino. It meant killin' Bill Winters. Well, I'd killed a man or two and wasn't chicken-hearted, but this time I got cold feet. I softened up. Because Bill's wife fetched her baby boy and drove out in a buggy to camp the mornin' we was leavin' to cross the Staked Plains. She shook hands with all us boys and wished us luck. I'd bin raised a orphan. Kicked around all my life and raised tough. The only wimmen I'd ever knowed was the wrong kind.

"Well, she shoved that baby at me to hold a minute and she dabbed at her eyes because she said the dust that the cattle kicked up made 'em itchy. She was tryin' not to cry. First and last time I ever held a yearlin' kid. She laughed a little shaky when she took back the baby. Then she leaned from the buggy and kissed me and told me to take care of her husband, Bill.

"That done the trick. She was the only decent woman that ever treated me thataway. So when the time come, there on the Red River, for

me to pick a fight with Bill Winters and kill him, I weakened. I jumped Sabino, instead. Whipped him and pulled out with my bed horse. I camped that night about ten miles below the crossin' on the Red. I had a bottle of likker I hadn't opened and I drunk 'er all.

"It was Bill Winters that woke me up by shovin' a gun in my belly. I come out of it a-fightin', but he rapped me between the horns with his gun barrel. He had me hogtied and was heatin' his runnin' iron when I come alive. An' Lon Hutchins is settin' his horse a ways off, holdin' what looks like half the remuda. Sabino and Spade had run them horses off and drifted 'em to my camp. Made it look like I'd stole 'em.

"Bill Winters branded me and Lon watched him. I told Winters I'd foller him and kill him for what he was doin'. Lon heard me cuss him.

I GOT into trouble and did some years in the pen right after that. When I got out I come up the trail to kill Bill Winters. And I aimed to kill Sabino and Spade where I cut their sign.

"I got here too late to kill Winters. But I located Sabino. Caught 'im alone on the trail. He begged like a yaller dog. Told me that him and Spade had killed Bill Winters when Bill caught 'em rustlin' his cattle. That they'd killed Bill and Sabino had married the widder.

"On the way to the ranch after the weddin' she found out the kind of a snake she'd married. Sabino had got drunk in town and talked too much on the way home. She told him what she thought of him and said she was goin' to have him jailed. Sabino lost his temper and hit 'er over the head with his gun. Killed her. He whipped the team till they

run away, then swung 'em so as to cramp the buggy wheels and overturn the rig. Made it look like she'd bin killed thataway. He got skinned up enough to make it look good.

"Sabino told it all to me when he begged for his life. Said if I'd string my bets with him he'd cut me a half interest in the Bow and Arrow when he'd got shut of the Winters kid, meanin' you. And that he'd do more than that. He'd tell me where there was a sack of gold buried. All I had to do was dig it up that night. He'd meet me there and fetch a jug and we'd have a medicine talk. He was buyin' his life with that gold and a half interest in the Bow and Arrow.

"I had nothin' to win right then by killin' Sabino. I was just out of the pen and dead broke. So I told Sabino to meet me at the place where he said the gold was buried and I let him go.

"I dug up the gold. Found the fresh grave where Sabino had buried the prospector he'd murdered. I buried the gold and made a fire on top of the place. Cooked me some grub that belonged to the murdered prospector. Sabino had Spade and his night riders with him when he showed up. They had me foul. They burned my feet to make me tell where I'd planted the gold. I wouldn't squeal and they strung me up. And the rest of it you know. I rode back there, that one night, hopin' I'd find Sabino huntin' for the gold. That Red Webber feller was there. He pulled a gun and I shot him. Then strung him up to throw a scare into Sabino. That's all of it. I'd kill Bill Winters if he was alive. I'd kill you and then take the Bow and Arrow outfit away from Sabino if you hadn't saved my life.

"I made that promise to Bill Winters that I'd own the Bow and Arrow brand and everything in that

brand. But I can't do it. You saved my life and I'm payin' off that debt. You're shootin' it out with Jack Sabino, and I'm backin' your play. I've turned a coyote whelp into a snap-pin' wolf. Sabino killed your father and your mother. No, you won't be scared when you meet Sabino. You're rearin' to git at 'im. That right?" Mavity's whisper was like the voice of something not quite human in the heavy darkness.

"I'll take Sabino," Pete said, in a tense, unnatural voice.

Mavity's chuckle was a rasping rattle in his broken windpipe.

THEY rode on. They heard the loud thudding of shod hoofs. Spade, on his way to the beef herd from the remuda, passed at a lope not a hundred yards away. They heard him call out in the darkness:

"Where you at, Sabino?"

"What the hell— That you, Spade? What fetches you here?" Sabino was cursing.

"Ride at 'em!" rasped Mavity, and spurred his horse to a run.

Pete and Mavity rode side by side. They could see the blurred outlines of Sabino and Spade sitting their horses a ways off from the bedded herd.

"Yell at 'em, Pete," whispered Mavity, riding closer to him.

"I'm a-comin' to you, Sabino!" Pete yelled. "Me, Pete Winters! I'm comin' to kill you!"

Mavity was riding hard, standing in his stirrups, his long-barreled six-shooter in his hand. He leaned sideways in his saddle and the barrel of his gun caught Pete alongside the head.

It felt like something exploded inside Pete's head. Like a ball of fire. For a moment, Mavity's ugly, rasping whisper filled his ears like a nightmare shout:

"Only damn baby I ever held. Only woman that ever treated me like I wasn't—"

Pete's horse stumbled, thrown off balance. It went down and Pete was thrown clear, half knocked out. He saw Mavity ride straight at Sabino and Spade, trying to yell at them in his harsh, rattling, broken whisper. And all three were shooting at once. Mavity's running horse carried him into the other horses. Their guns still spewed fire.

Pete stumbled towards his horse and he got into the saddle somehow. His grip on his six-shooter had not slackened its tightness. He saw two riderless horses go off into the night, stirrups popping. He saw one man still in the saddle and heard that man shout. The voice was hoarse with pain and fear, but it belonged to Sabino. Pete yelled something at him and spurred his horse to a run.

All Pete knew was that there weren't enough bullets in the world to stop him. Nothing could kill him before he got to Sabino and killed him. Sabino was triggering one shot after another at him and Pete felt the stab of a hot slug tearing his left shoulder. He was within twenty or thirty feet of the big Bow and Arrow ramrod now and he was shooting at Sabino and shouting something at the man. He saw Sabino sway like a drunken man and fall. Saw the riderless horse go tearing off into the night.

Pete slid his horse to a halt and quit his saddle. He landed on his feet, lost his balance and fell, just as a spurt of gunfire not five feet away blazed in the heavy blackness. The bullet whined close to Pete's head. He got to his hands and knees and dove headlong at the dim, moving shape. That leap landed him on top of Sabino and he let go of his empty gun. Sabino fought with his last

bit of desperate, wounded strength. Pete's hands found Sabino's throat and his fingers sank into the corded neck of the man he had always feared and now hated with all the fury of some animal bent on its kill.

Only dimly did Pete hear the shooting around him. The thunder of the stampeding herd. The shouting of Slim and Lon Hutchins calling his name and shooting as they yelled. Pete was throttling the last bit of life from the bullet-torn body of Sabino. He was killing the man who had murdered his father and mother. The coyote whelp had turned into a killer wolf.

He was still gripping Sabino's throat when Lon Hutchins finally located him by the sound of his voice as he snarled Sabino's name into the dead ramrod's ears. Lon struck a match, then dropped it and pulled Pete's hands away. Pete was sobbing and talking through set, gritting teeth. Then he went limp and lay there on the ground, blood spilling from his bullet-torn shoulder.

The shooting had died out. Slim, the Circle C rep and a couple of Bow and Arrow cowpunchers rode up. Somebody had a pint of whiskey they had found in Spade's pocket. Pete came awake with the taste of the raw whiskey in his mouth. One of the cowboys had kindled a little brush fire to make enough light.

FLOYD MAVITY was still alive. He lay on his side and his face was as gray as lead. His eyes were like slits of steel and his grin was as wolfish as it had been the first time Pete had ever seen it. Pete grinned back at him, reached out and gripped Mavity's hand.

"I got Sabino," Pete said. "I'm obliged, pardner."

"Tried to . . . knock you cold," Mavity gasped. "Didn't want you killed. Only baby I ever held. Only woman . . . understand?"

Pete nodded. Lon held the bottle to Mavity's mouth and the dying outlaw drank thirstily.

"Only human I ever claimed for a pardner," Mavity whispered. "That young Pete . . . he saved my life. Mavity pays off debts . . . good or bad. So long, Pete."

Blood spilled from Mavity's grinning mouth into the stubble of gray-black beard. Lon covered the dead man's face with a saddle blanket. Then he wiped the blood from the neck of the bottle and made Pete take another drink.

Lon and Slim had found the coulee where the two tough hands were holding their prisoners. They had shot one of them. The other made his getaway. They had freed the prisoners and gotten to the beef herd just in time to keep Sabino's tough hands from taking a hand in the fight. Then the cattle had quit the bed ground with a thundering rush. Some of Sabino's men had been caught in the stampede and a couple of them killed under the avalanche of cloven hoofs.

Sabino and Spade were buried there on the prairie. Pete had the cowboys dig a deep grave near the graves of his father and mother. They buried Floyd Mavity there.

It was, Pete told himself and the dead who lay buried there, the only thing he could do for the man who had given him that which he valued more than all the cattle and horses in his Bow and Arrow iron, more than all the range within its wide boundaries, more than life itself. For what is a man's life without it? That thing we call by the name of Courage.

THE STORY OF THE WEST

told in pictures and text by

GERARD DELANO

The caravan which left Independence in 1829 was accompanied by the government's first military escort under Major Riley. The escort proceeded with the caravan as far as Chouteau's Island in the Arkansas. Since no hostile redskins had been seen, it was then deemed safe for the escort to turn back, the caravan proceeding on its way across the prairie and desert.

But the caravan had hardly left the escort behind and had covered a bare seven miles, when three mounted men, riding well in advance of the line of wagons, were attacked by a band of Kiowas, one of the most savage and troublesome of the tribes infesting the region covered by the Trail.

Two of the men were well mounted on fast horses and, after a desperate burst of speed, escaped from the pursuing Indians. The third man, however, was not so fortunate. He was Samuel Craig Lamme, a merchant of Franklin, Missouri, who had the misfortune to be riding a cranky mule. The mule failed to respond to Lamme's frantic kicks and whipping and in a few minutes Lamme was overtaken, killed and scalped, before any of the caravaneers could go to his assistance. Alarmed, the traders sent a messenger racing back to Major Riley, who promptly got his troops under way and arrived under cover of darkness that same night.

Riley and his troops continued with the caravan from this point to Sand Creek, from which place the traders continued for the rest of the trip in safety.

While the Kiowas, Comanches and several other savage tribes were among the most troublesome Indians along the Trail, the Pawnees have perhaps been most often credited with the bloody episodes which spiced the romance of that thoroughfare of adventure.

The main and former lands of the Pawnees were in what is now Nebraska. Branches of their tribe extended into Texas and Kansas, and it was through a large part of the country covered by this

tribe that the Trail wound its sandy way.

The Pawnee men, like the Osages, shaved the crown of the head, leaving a ridge crest or tuft of hair in the center of the head. In the center of this tuft, a crest of deer and horsehair dyed red, was fastened and often was surmounted by an eagle's quill. In the center of the patch of hair was preserved a small lock which was never cut, but was cultivated to the greatest length possible. This hair was braided and passed through a curiously curved bone which lay in the center of the crest and spread it out to a uniform shape. This little braid was the "scalp lock" and was offered to the enemy if they could get it, as a trophy.

After contact with traders these people used scissors or knives to cut their hair. Before that they used to burn it off with red-hot stones.

The Pawnees were a very powerful and warlike nation living largely, in the days of the Trail, on the river Platte, about a hundred miles from its junction with the Missouri. They laid claim to and exercised control over the whole country from its mouth to the base of the Rocky Mountains. They numbered some twenty to twenty-four thousand prior to 1832 when traders and whiskey sellers brought smallpox among them and the disease cut their numbers in half.

This was one of the main reasons why the Pawnees preyed so consistently on traders and made their lives so precarious, for after the pestilence they were more warlike than ever. In spite of the many bloody incidents along the Trail which were laid to the Pawnees it was among this tribe, prior to the scourge of the smallpox, that the traders reaped their greatest harvest. In fairness to the tribe, let it be said that according to certain authorities "there is probably not another tribe on the continent that has been more abused and incensed by the system of trade and money making than the Pawnees."

NEXT WEEK: WHITE MAN'S RANSOM



Lamme was overtaken, killed and scalped by the bloodthirsty Kiowas before any of the caravaneers could come to his assistance.

Pete wasn't even wearing a gun but Schull tried to shoot him down!



RANGE PEDDLER

by CLIFF WALTERS

RANGE PEDDLER PETE SHEPHARD, who had a pair of wide shoulders, affable blue eyes, and hair that just about matched the color of the buckskin team which pulled his light spring wagon across the topographical adversities of the Chain Basin country, stood six feet one. He also stood a lot of joshing from the cow-

punchers who bought his wares.

Pete drove his team down the slope overlooking Maverick Springs and halted the harness-marked buckskins at the roundup camp of the Trowel outfit, the biggest cow outfit in Chain Basin. Bedrolls were dotted about the trampled grass. In the rope corral, anchored to a wheel of

the bed wagon, milled the horse cavy. And the dust from those hoofs was a sunset-gilded scarf spiced with the tang of sage. Pete liked the tang of that dust and the noisy greetings of the punchers. He grinned as old Sam Campbell, the cook, bawled: "If it ain't Peddler Pete with his size-twelve feet!"

"And timin' himself to land here 'fore supper's all over!" called Slim Fenton.

"Howdy, gents and customers," said Pete, smiling as he stiffly descended from a wagon seat which had rocked and jolted him over many long miles since sunup.

"Now don't fall over one another tryin' to help me unhook my team. Just go on with your overeatin'."

"You'd better have some bridle reins in that band wagon of yourn," mumbled Tubby Smith, his mouth full of beefsteak and biscuits. "I busted both mine yesterday and—"

"And you'll stretch your unshaved face all outa shape if you don't stop waddin' it so full of grub." Pete grinned at the plump puncher. Then, turning to Jim Dorr, range foreman of the Trowel, he added: "I hope you haven't been lettin' these boys play poker, Jim, until two or three of 'em's got all the cash."

"Well," said the iron-gray little foreman, "maybe you didn't get here none too soon, Pete. They have been playin' some poker. And the new hand there, Coon Schull, is doin' pretty well for himself." He nodded toward the new hand, a big, thick-chested fellow with dark eyes and dark hair; a puncher Pete Shephard had never seen before on Chain Basin range.

"Maybe we can get some of this peddler's money later on, boys," said Coon Schull.

"Nope." Pete shook his head

slowly. "I don't play cards much."

"Why not?" countered Schull. "Ain't you sport enough to give these gents a chance to get back some of the money you take away from 'em?"

"I try to give 'em something when I take their money," Pete answered mildly.

Later the punchers gathered about Pete's wagon and looked over his wares—bridles, rawhide ropes, hack-amores, latigos, guns, ammunition, saddle blankets, tobacco; a wagon box that, neatly arranged, contained almost everything a man on the range might need.

Tubby Smith bought bridle reins and a new hatband. Slim Fenton bought a pair of cuffs and a pair of spur straps. Jim Dorr bought a Navaho saddle blanket. Nearly everyone bought something, and there was a short time when Pete was busy making change and handing out merchandise. There was only one man who didn't buy. That was Coon Schull, who, in the fading light of dusk, kept handling various items and tossing them—a bit contemptuously, it seemed to Pete—back into the wagon.

"All right, boys," called Schull, finally. "If you haven't spent all your money in payin' three prices for junk, we've still got time for a little poker playin'. Spread out your bedroll, Slim."

"Just a minute, Schull," said Pete quietly. "You haven't paid me yet for that fancy-braided buckskin watch chain."

"What watch chain?" demanded the dark man hotly.

"Why," said Pete, and the big man's voice was as even as the flow of Maverick Springs, "that chain you stuck in your pocket—when you thought I didn't see you."

"Callin' me a damned thief, are you?" Schull's voice rose and his broad, none-too-clean fists clenched hard. "I haven't got none of your junky trash in my pockets!"

"Which statement makes you a damn liar," said Pete Shephard. "If you don't want your pockets tore off, start fishin' that leather trinket out."

"Start tearin'!" bawled Schull. As he jumped toward the range peddler, he unleashed a powerful right swing that barely grazed Pete's ear. Before Schull could shoot that right swing across again, Pete's left fist had plowed a furrow of hide from the dark man's cheekbone, a short, powerful blow quickly followed by a right cross that thudded noisily to Schull's mouth.

Fuming now through split lips, Coon Schull rushed and threw a savage blow which Pete took on the shoulder. That was the last blow Schull landed. He took a nose-flattening right, and a left uppercut to the side of his jaw. He rocked off balance a little, but Pete straightened him up with a jarring punch. Agile for a man of his size, and with the mildness now gone from his blue eyes, Pete moved in with swinging fists.

His next right swing staggered Schull backward for a good ten feet. Three hard blows Pete ripped into his opponent's body, punches that blasted breath from straining lungs. Schull lowered his guard to ward off a fourth blow coming at his chest—and took a paralyzing blow to the face. He staggered. Again Pete shot over that right swing. This time it crashed like the kick of a horse to Schull's jaw. The dark man's head jerked back and he sprawled full length.

But Schull had hardly hit the ground before Pete started ripping

the pockets from the fallen man's overalls. The second pocket revealed the stolen watch chain—and also a watch!

"Look at that, boys!" yelled Slim Fenton. "I didn't lose my watch when that damned bronc threwed me and drug me halfway across Badger Flats yesterday. There's my watch!"

"Yeah!" shouted Dick Ainsworth, another puncher. "And that's my twenty-dollar gold piece I thought I'd lost over at the camp on Cow Crick! The damned thievin'—"

"Stand back, boys," said Jim Dorr. The range foreman was glaring down at the man whose pockets were full of stolen loot. "I knew this overgrown scum was never much of a cowhand. But now I know why he hired out to ride. So he could steal whatever he couldn't win with his card-sharp poker playin'." Jim Dorr turned to Pete. "Thanks for comin' along, Pete."

"Yeah, and for handin' that scum what he had comin'!" said Slim Fenton, grabbing his watch.

A half dozen men slapped Pete's broad back. Sam Campbell, the cook, made for the chuck wagon, grabbed up a bucket of cold spring water which, amidst unanimous approval, he dumped over Coon Schull's head. The fallen man gasped deeply and sat up. He started to curse the man who had whipped him in a fair fight, but he didn't get far with his abuse.

Willing hands grabbed Schull and dragged him, as a calf is dragged toward the branding fire, to a log. They deftly turned the thief face downward over that log. Then a pair of leather chaps eagerly wielded by Slim Fenton began whipping through the cooling air. But those chaps, popping to the seat of Schull's overalls, were anything but cooling.

When Slim was tired of applying leather cure, they jerked Schull to his feet and told him to saddle his own horse. Five minutes later, and having to stand up in his stirrups, Schull was riding away from camp, never to return to the Trowel wagon.

"Good riddance," grunted Jim Dorr. "And all 'cause your eyes are as quick as them big fists of yours, Pete."

Pete grinned and changed the conversation to more pleasant subjects. While early night scattered her star seed in the sky, the range peddler related bits of gossip picked up here and there at cow camps and ranches scattered over the vast reaches of Chain Basin.

The next morning, after a breakfast at daylight, he was waving good-by to mounted men starting out on circle. Then he was on his way again, driving his gentle buckskins toward another roundup camp over near Elkhorn Buttes, sometimes following roads through the sagebrush, sometimes following dim trails and sometimes no road at all.

TWO weeks of traveling, of camping at remote ranches, went by before Pete Shephard drove his almost-empty wagon into the little town of Rockpoint, far in the southeastern corner of Chain Basin. With dust powdered on the rolled brim of his hat, and with a thick roll of currency in his wallet, Pete drove up to the two-roomed cabin which had long been his headquarters, and called to the thin, limping man who came out to meet him:

"Hello, Hank! Supper cookin' yet?"

"It soon will be." Hank Webb, Pete's half-crippled cousin, started unhooking the tugs of the buckskin team. "Have a good trip, Pete?"

"Yeah, pretty good," replied the

big man, glad to leave the wagon seat. "How you been makin' it?"

"Oh, same old thing. Loafin' mostly, but workin' over at Baldy Lathrop's store part of the time."

"No wonder you're sportin' a new hat," Pete chuckled. "You should've saved your hard-earned money, Hank. I promised to buy you a new hat soon as I got back."

"Maybe it's kinda nice to buy something with my own money, just for a change, Pete. Yeah, and get offn charity for once in the last ten years."

"Now, Hank," soothed the big man. "I guess you earn your way around this shack. You cook up some mighty good meals and—"

"And eat ten times what I'm worth," came the reply. "But maybe it'll be different from now on, Pete. I'd have a steady job, and one that even a no-good cripple like me could handle if I could raise some money. Baldy Lathrop had to spend a heap of money on doctor bills for his wife before she died. He's kinda lookin' around for a pard."

"Well, that's somethin' to consider," Pete said. "You like the store business, Hank?"

"You're danged right I do."

At supper the two men talked matters over. And Pete, whose range peddling had always netted him a slow, small profit, said that he had a couple thousand dollars in the bank. If that would buy Hank a half interest in Lathrop's store—

"Yeah, it would," Hank said. The eyes of the thin man brightened hopefully for a moment, then somberness slowly clouded them. "But I'm not takin' your money, Pete. You've worked too hard for it."

Hank Webb's protests didn't swerve Pete from the decision the big man was reaching, however. If Pete had worked hard and long for

his savings, he would cheerfully have lost them for Hank's sake.

This cousin hadn't always had a crooked leg, and one that was shorter than the other. Hank Webb, when only a lad of sixteen, had suffered permanent injury and what had looked like certain death, in order to extricate his huskier cousin from the hoofs and goring horns of an enraged bull which the two boys had corralled. If Hank hadn't come to his cousin's assistance, Pete Shephard would have died in that corral.

"If Baldy'll sell a half interest in that store for a couple thousand," said Pete, "you're buying it tomorrow, Hank."

"Why? Because you still think that, after all these years of takin' care of me, you owe me something?"

"Listen, Hank," argued the range peddler. "I'm not offerin' you charity. I'm offerin' you the use of money that ain't doin' me a bit of good right now. You'll pay it back. And if you don't, I'll twist the ears right off your bull head. Savvy?" Big Pete got up, walked around the table and grabbed his cousin's ear between two strong fingers.

"Well, all right, Pete. If it's strictly business. And if you think I'll make a go of it as a storekeeper."

"How can you help but make a go of it?" Pete countered. "Rockpoint draws trade from a big territory. And you'll deal fair with people. That's all they ask."

Hank grinned happily. "I might make you stop your danged range peddlin' one of these days. What you sell at the cow camps I can't sell when them cowpunchers come to town."

"We'll worry about that later," Pete said, smiling. "Besides, I sell most of my stuff to folks that hardly ever come to Rockpoint. Let's go

over to Baldy's place and have a powwow with him."

Eagerly Hank reached for his new hat and hobbled along beside Pete. The two men were passing the Blue Chip Saloon when a thick voice called: "Well, look who's here!"

Pete glanced toward the hitching rack, saw that the dark and partially drunk man leaning across the rack was Coon Schull, the thief who had been kicked out of the Trowel roundup camp. With a leer on the face that still bore marks of Pete's knuckles, Schull hooted: "Takin' quite a chance, ain't you, Shephard? With only a damned cripple for a bodyguard, instead of a whole roundup camp to help you outta any scrapes you might get into?"

Pete had left his gun at home. He suspected that Schull, who wore one, was trying to goad him into doing something rash. The dark man's hand was close to his gun as he kept spewing oaths at Pete.

"That tinhorn gambler's been hangin' around town for a week, Pete," mumbled Hank. "But why's he got it in for you so? Why's he— Look out! He's pullin' his gun!"

Pete was looking out very alertly. He had never traveled so fast as he did across that twenty feet of distance between Schull and himself. A gun flashed up from its holster as men, hearing the loud words outside, came surging from the saloon.

Those men got there just in time to see Pete duck under the sweep of Schull's lifting gun, which exploded and ripped a bullet into the log front of the saloon. Then Pete tangled with Schull. The range peddler, infuriated because of the unfair advantage Schull had tried to take, was a more savage man than had fought Schull before. This time Pete Shephard was a giant wolf leaping to the kill. He blasted blow after

blow to the dark man's face and body.

Awed men said no word as they watched Pete handle the man who had tried to murder him. Silent, tense, they looked on while the range peddler, a quiet man who had never fought in the streets of Rockpoint before, beat another big man into a reeling, helpless wreck.

After the first dozen blows, Pete could have knocked Schull cold with a blow to the jaw, as he had once before. But this time he was less merciful. This time the range peddler, strong jaw set as tight as a vise, deliberately ripped knuckle scars into Schull's battered and bleeding face; cut punishing marks there that the dark man would carry forever.

And when Schull could no longer stand on his feet, Pete dragged him down to the livery stable, saddled his horse for him and heaved him astride.

"Get outta this town, off this range," Pete said. "The next time you pick a fight with me, I'll kill you."

"He won't be back!" yelled an excited bystander. "He'll remember that beatin' as long as he lives!"

Calmly then Pete told the crowd why Schull had attempted to kill him; told of their battle out at Maverick Springs. Satisfied, the group of men trailed back to the saloon and the poker tables. But Pete and Hank went on over to Baldy Lathrop's store.

Lathrop, a plump, bald widower with a cherubic smile, and a store in which the stock of goods was rather sadly depleted, was agreeable to taking in a partner who could stock his barren shelves with more goods.

"Don't think I don't know how to run a store, Pete," he told the peddler. "It's just that my wife's long

sickness cost a whale of a lot of money. When you figure up Doc McCord's mileage on all his trips over here from Sandville, well—"

"I know," Pete told him. "You think you and Hank can get along all right?"

"Sure," said the storekeeper. "Hank'll treat the customers—and me—fair. That's all I ask. We'll fix up the deal in the morning, if you say so."

"Fair enough," said Pete.

As the two cousins walked back to their cabin at the edge of town, Hank talked eagerly and smiled constantly. It did Pete's heart good to see this new interest his cousin had taken in life. The crippled man, unfitted for range work, would no longer sit and brood day after day in the cabin. He would feel that he had a place in the world. Of course, Hank didn't know much about store-keeping, but he would soon learn.

A WEEK later, starting out with a rested team and a wagon again amply loaded with merchandise, Pete was en route across the Chain Basin range. Once more the sage-tintured breeze cooled the leathery face of the range peddler. Once more he knew the lyric song of meadow larks, the jingle of single-tree clips and the joshing of cow-punchers and ranchers who bought his wares. And sometimes lonely camps beside rollicking streams whose ripples were silver beauty under stars and moon welcomed him.

It was at the Trowel ranch this time that Pete encountered Jim Dorr and Slim Fenton and Tubby Smith who, upon questioning the range peddler, were surprised to hear that he had had a second battle with Coon Schull.

"I'd sure like to seen you skin that overgrown pack rat up," said

Slim Fenton. "One more tangle between you two, and Schull's face'll look like something a sharp-shod cavvy had trailed over."

"One more tangle," said Pete dryly, "and one of us'll be laid out stiffer than a corral pole."

It was midsummer by the time Pete, having made one of his longest trips, drew near to Rockpoint again. He was watering his team at the Cottonwood Creek crossing when old Alex Hatfield, a prospector, came along.

"Howdy, Pete," Alex said. "Well, since you're headin' for town, I suppose you've heard the news."

"What news?" Pete asked.

"Why, about the store robbery. About your cousin Hank gettin' shot up."

"Hank?" Pete exclaimed. "Is he—"

"Oh, he ain't dead—yet," said Hatfield. "But old Doc McCord's goin' to have a time savin' him, so they say."

Never had the team of buckskins traveled so fast as they did during that twelve miles which brought their driver into Rockpoint. The dusty spring wagon hadn't stopped rolling when Pete leaped from it and hurried into the cabin before which Doc McCord's black team was tied.

"How is he, doc?" Pete anxiously asked of the elderly physician.

"Hello—Pete," moaned the man lying on the bed. "I'm sure glad . . . you're here."

Haltingly, and against Doc McCord's orders, Hank Webb poured out his story. Just at closing time the night before, he and Baldy Lathrop had been robbed. A dozen sheep outfits, trailing across the southeastern end of the basin and making for the high summer range of the mountains, had stocked up with supplies at the Rockpoint

store. In fact, they had about cleaned out all the new stock Hank and his pard had laid in. Lathrop had planned to go to Sandville this morning to deposit the money in the bank there, but now there was no money to deposit. Nearly four thousand dollars had been taken by the robber who, without any provocation on Hank's part, had shot the crippled man twice.

"He had a mask on, the hold-up," Hank explained. "I thought he was a big dark feller, but Baldy says he was light-complected and had two fingers missin' off his left hand. I . . . I didn't notice that."

"No more talking, Hank," said Doc McCord. "Lathrop can tell Pete all he wants to know. And Lathrop's in better shape for talking than you are."

Mouth set tight, Pete stood there looking down at the man who had once saved his life. The hands of the range peddler were clenched, as if he longed to grip the neck of the thief who had shot a cripple. It wasn't loss of the money that Pete had staked his cousin to that worried him. He didn't even think of that part. It was just that some treacherous coward, one who evidently knew when the pickings were good, had sneaked into the store and—

"I'm goin' over and talk with Baldy," Pete said. "Take it easy, Hank. And don't worry about losin' that money. To hell with that part!"

Pete was soon interviewing Baldy Lathrop, the little man who usually wore a cherubic smile, but who, today, slowly paced the floor of his looted store.

"Big, light-complexioned fellow, eh?" said Pete. "And with two fingers missin' off his left hand? Well,

has anybody ever seen such a man around this range?"

"No," groaned the storekeeper. "That's the hell of it, Pete. Nobody knows where he come from nor where he's gone. It was too damned dark last night for trailin', and by morning he had a lot of head start. How's Hank?"

"Shot up to hell!" said Pete grimly.

"Well, don't let him know that four thousand dollars was more than we could stand to lose, Pete. It'll only worry him more. That damned lead-slingin' skunk has broke us, put us outta business."

Slowly Pete turned and walked out of the store. Lathrop called after him: "If I can set up with Hank tonight, just call on me, Pete."

"Well, maybe you can," Pete answered. "I think I'll be takin' a ride up toward Bobcat Breaks. I thought I saw the smoke of a campfire curlin' up from that country when I left town last time—over toward Bobcat Spring. And that's the handiest hang-out I know of for the kind of a skunk that would shoot a crippled man."

GETTING Doc McCord to promise that he would stay throughout the night with Hank, Pete went to the livery stable, hired the best saddle horse they had, and headed across a range already splotted with long shadows cast by the lowering sun. In the heart of the big man was apprehension concerning the wounded man who lay back in Rockpoint. He hoped he would have opportunity to use the .45 which rode at his hip.

Pete was following more than a trail. He was following a strong hunch. And if he scanned alertly the trail ahead, he also watched the backtrail. He was entering rough

country, a boulder-jutting prelude to Bobcat Breaks proper, when he sighted a rider between him and the distant town.

Pete rode on at a jogging gait until he came to a spot where the dimming trail cut sharply around the base of a miniature promontory. There he stopped and waited.

It wasn't long before he caught the hoof sounds of a fast-ridden horse. Then a rider rode abruptly upon him. It was Baldy Lathrop!

"Gosh!" blurted the storekeeper. "You scared me for a minute, Pete. Well, I'm only glad it's *you* I've run into. I got to thinkin' things over after you left town. Why are you tacklin' a job like this all alone? Want to get a dose of the same thing Hank got? Why didn't you let me come along and help you. Hell! I can handle a gun. And I will—if we can round up the buzzard that shot Hank."

"Good!" said Pete quietly. "I'm glad to have you along, Baldy. It'll make it a heap better if we do run into a gun-slingin' thief. Let's ride."

Together they jogged along into a ravine-gashed land that steadily grew rougher. They were near the rocky pocket wherein lay Bobcat Spring, the only water in this part of the range, when Pete said: "Careful which way you point that cocked gun, Baldy. If your old horse stumbles, it might go off. And we don't want to warn anybody if—well, if anybody's here. It might—"

Even as Pete spoke Baldy's old horse stumbled for the tenth time in the last mile. And the gun in the storekeeper's hand exploded, a loud report that echoed along the sand-rock walls that ribbed this land.

"We'll wait here for a while," Pete said. Then, quickly whipping out his own gun, he pointed it straight at Baldy Lathrop and said: "Just

yell out that everything's all right. And yell out your name."

Lathrop blinked his eyes. "What the hell you tryin' to do, Pete? Sign a death warrant for both of us? Quit pointin' that damned gun at me and—"

"Do what I tell you or I'll pull this trigger!"

Lathrop swallowed hard, but he obeyed. It wasn't long before the clink of shod hoofs could be heard. The two waiting riders were in an open spot fringed with scrub cedar trees. Pete reined his black aside.

"You wait right there in the open, where whoever's comin' can see you, Lathrop," he ordered. "But don't try ridin' outta sight of me and don't do any more hollerin'. That is, not unless you want a bullet through your middle."

The color had faded from Lathrop's plump face. He looked at the big man, who was now taking his gun. The threat in Pete's hard eyes made Lathrop surrender his gun silently. Then there were tense moments while the third rider drew nearer. At last the approaching man came into sight of Lathrop.

"What the hell's up, Baldy?" the newcomer shouted. "Why didn't you come on up to my camp instead of shootin' around? Want to tell the whole damned world where I'm hangin' out?"

The sound of that voice fanned a hot flame within Pete Shephard. He leaped off his horse and stepped out into sight; out toward Baldy Lathrop, who was making a terrified effort to warn Coon Schull of the circumstances. Before the storekeeper could finish his warning, Schull had sighted Pete.

The dark man, his twitching face still unsightly from the last beating Pete had given him, growled: "So

you're double-crossin' me, are you, Lathrop?"

THAT was the last thing Coon Schull said. His gun was already drawn. He was arcing it upward at Pete. The slanting sunlight glinted on the barrel of that weapon which, fired hastily, but less accurately than Pete's steadily held gun, spurted its lead high of the mark.

Twice, three times, Pete's finger pulled the trigger. And the man who often shot coyotes from his peddler wagon knew that every bullet hit the mark. With savage joy he heard the dull thud of those bullets, saw big Coon Schull's body pitch from the saddle and twist to the ground.

Baldy Lathrop made a croaking sound as if he, too, had been shot, but it was only fear rasping from his throat. The storekeeper wheeled his horse, threatened to bolt away from the scene, but the muzzle of Pete's gun swung around and covered the frightened man.

"Get off that horse, Lathrop," said Pete. "We're packin' what's left of your pal, Coon Schull, into town."

"He ain't my pal!" Lathrop blurted.

"He must be," said Pete evenly. "Otherwise you wouldn't have tried throwin' folks off the trail by claimin' the man that shot Hank was light-complexioned and had two fingers missin'. Hank's description and yours didn't jibe. And I found out you lied about havin' to take in a pard. You didn't get money-pinchin' payin' doctor bills. You haven't paid Doc McCord one damned cent that you owe him. He told me so. You didn't deposit the money Hank paid you for his share in the store in the bank, because you wanted it stolen. And Coon Schull was glad enough to take a crack at

me, glad enough to fill my cousin full of lead."

"You can't prove—"

"Yes, I can. I've always wondered why you used to be so hostile about me peddlin' merchandise on the range, cuttin' into your business a little, and then havin' you turn around and make a play for Hank's partnership. You wanted my money to be invested with you. For Hank's sake, I didn't question it, Lathrop. But after what just happened, it's all pretty plain. And there wasn't another skunk in the country that would do what was done except Coon Schull. Am I right?" Big hands seized the storekeeper's throat and choked the truth from him.

Later, back at the cabin in Rockpoint, Pete chuckled softly as he handed over to his cousin the money he had taken from Coon Schull's pockets, plus two thousand that Lathrop had cached away. It wasn't the money that made Pete chuckle. It was because Doc McCord was positive that Hank would recover.

"You said somebody'd die the next time you and Schull tangled," said Hank. He was grinning now. "By gosh, Pete! We could make a real store outta that place."

"You could, and will," said Pete. "Oh, I'll look after it while you're gettin' well. But after that, I'll be headin' out on the range with my wagon. I always thought I wanted a store, but—hell! After all—"

His voice trailed off as his gaze turned toward the moonlit hills stretching away across Chain Basin. Strong was the call of those hills to the big man who had so long known the joy of their freedom, the joshing of cowpunchers in roundup camps, the song of crystal-clear streams, and the ululant cry of coyotes drifting on sage-spiced breezes. Pete Shephard was realizing now that a peddler wagon had brought him more than meager profits—it had become a home that, drawn by a pair of gentle buckskins, moved leisurely across the high hills of freedom.

THE END.





CALL FOR A TOWN TAMER

by HARRY F. OLMSTED

DISHRAG BENTON, they called him. And there you have a picture of the man. He looked like nothing quite so much as a well-worn dish cloth, wrung dry and thrown aside to stiffen. He was a little gent, standing only five feet four on the high heels of the cowboy boots he wore. He was gnarled, bowlegged, ewe-necked and he had a hump on his back like a camel. He might have been fifty or as young as thirty, no one could guess from the washed-out sandy hair that straggled almost to his narrow shoulders. His face was thin, hollow-cheeked and sallow. But under a pair of beetling, colorless brows were eyes as blue as the Arizona sky, eyes that sparkled like the desert stars.

Dishrag was the swamper in the Congress Saloon, in Caprock City. Some said that Pat Gibbons had em-

ployed him through an abiding sense of charity, that he kept him on only because he was sorry for him. But the fact remains that Dishrag was not lazy and he made a great show of upholding Pat's reputation for running the cleanest whiskey bar in the territory.

Dishrag slept in the little rear room, just off the gaming wing, and he led a lonely existence. It was his job to fix and tend the lunch available to the patrons on the little counter at the open end of the bar. And there he ate. He never went anywhere, because there was no one who wanted to go places with him. He never spent any money, and each Monday morning he sidled down the walk to the bank and importantly deposited the ten dollars Pat Gibbons had paid him for his past week's labors.

The little swamper was lonely all right, but he never showed it. He maintained a fixed smile, no matter how he felt. When he had it on, he invariably tipped his hat to the townsmen and there was a ring of sincerity in his stock greeting: "Dry powder and good health, gents."

This night, the Congress was buzzing with business. The games were well patronized and the bar was lined. Down near the end of the long mahogany counter a group of punchers from the Hashknife were drinking and swapping yarns. And Dishrag, on a stool behind his little lunch counter, held his head cocked to one side in an attitude of heavy listening. He liked cowboys, looked up to them. And though they paid little or no attention to him, their mannerisms, their glamour, their phrases never failed to affect him.

The talk of the Hashknife men ran the gamut of horses, cows, the state of the range, coming around, as such talk always did, to gun fights. Someone started telling an adventure of Billy the Kid, and Dishrag climbed off his stool without knowing it, and moved over to stand near them, craning his neck over the shoulder of one, listening in awed silence to the telling of the tale. In his excitement, he must have pressed against the man before him. The cowboy looked around, saw him listening there. In the way of one who had drunk too much, he rasped:

"What the hell you doin', stickin' yore bill in here? Bunch it!"

He swung his arm, taking Dishrag across the mouth, with an upward lift against his nose. More of a shove than a blow, but it lifted the light swamper, hurled him back and down into the sawdust.

Dishrag sat there for a moment, looking so foolish as to wring a lusty laugh from the onlookers. But the

swamper couldn't laugh with them. He had been kicked around before; it wasn't that. But that blood-quickenning story was interrupted. And his nose was bleeding.

From his back pocket he drew a large red bandanna, the kind working cowboys use to draw over their nostrils when dust is blowing, and dabbed at his injured nose. He noticed then that the patrons were hailing Marshal Rufe Appling, who had just entered. Dishrag tried to hide the scarf as he scrambled up. But he couldn't hide the trickle of crimson on his lip.

Rufe Appling was his friend—the only man in town who sometimes sat down and swapped chin music with him. A fine, friendly man, Appling, unaffected and afraid of nothing. Dishrag was proud of those talks with the lawman, and he tried to turn away now so his friend would not see him like this. But he couldn't turn. The marshal's stern gray eyes were holding him as he slid forward. His voice reflected concern.

"You all right, Benton? You—"

"Oh, yes, sir!" Dishrag's smile came back. "I . . . I sorta bumped my nose, I reckon. Anyway, I allus have these fool bleeds this time uh year. A man'd think I had the glanders."

But his joke didn't get over. The lawman spun toward the big man who had felled the swamper. "Sanders," he said, and there was a sudden hush in the saloon, "I seen you hit this little jigger, just as I come in the door."

"Yeah?" The cowboy smirked to cover his embarrassment. "An' you're takin' up his cards to play 'em?"

Appling shook his head. "That ain't necessary, none whatever. But I am giving you a tip, one that'll be

good for your health if you take it."

"Tip? Such as what?"

Appling jerked his head toward Dishrag. "Know who he is, do you Sanders? Know that little man?"

"Shore I know him, marshal. Why not? He's Dishrag Benton, the nosiest little swamper that ever mucked out a spittoon."

"Benton!" said the marshal narrowly. "Think good, Sanders. An' the rest of you fellers. Benton! Benton!"

One of the punchers started, his eyes widening. "You . . . you don't mean *the* Benton? Not Prairie Dan?"

Marshal Appling's head inclined. His lips were moving. "Greatest marshal the plains ever knew. Greater than Bill Hickok or Wyatt Earp. Prince of pistoleers, utterly fearless an' the most patient man in the world. That patience is all that saved you, Sanders. Think it over."

HE turned away from them and the silence was so profound that the *chuff-chuff* of his boots in the sawdust was plainly audible. Every eye in the room was on Dishrag; he could feel the impact of the staring against his flesh. And looking after Appling, the little swamper could see the marshal's wide shoulders shaking, as if in silent mirth. He opened his lips to call after his friend, to protest that he was not Prairie Dan Benton, the town tamer, no kin to him in fact. But no sound came. He was flabbergasted.

Appling passed through the swing doors, and then the spell was broken. A light laugh rippled along the bar, swelled to uncontrolled mirth that shook the barroom. This little mouselike swamper Prairie Dan Benton? That was good. Appling had to have his joke, and it was rich. Men cuffed one another, slapping

their thighs and holding their sides. And then, when the hilarity had somewhat subsided, Sanders jumped onto a table.

"Gents," he hollered. "Who'd uh thunk we had a cee-lebrity spreadin' sawdust in the Congress Saloon? Prairie Dan Benton, alias Dishrag, gun fightin' fool that's got a private graveyard bigger'n Caprock City. Here's to him, boys. May he lie in a nice warm grave."

There was a rush to the bar. Men drank to Dishrag. They bought him drinks and made over him. Weakly, he tried to tell them that it was all a joke, which they were making plain they understood. But a man couldn't make himself heard. And then, when things had quieted down a little, he somehow knew it wasn't fitting to say anything that would make Rufe Appling out a liar.

After a while, they got him into a seat at the big gambling table, with a bottle of good whiskey before him. Games were forgotten and other saloons were emptied as the word spread. The free lunch went untended now and Pat Gibbons smiled tolerantly. This was excellent for business. The man he had befriended had suddenly become a drawing card.

"Tell us, Prairie Dan Benton," scoffed someone, "how come a famous man like you is down here in Arizona, swampin' out a barroom?"

Dishrag bit his lip. But the whiskey was warming him only less than the fact that men were making over him, noticing him. He let a chill settle in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, boys," he said tightly. "Ask me most anything except that. It's somethin' I ain't talkin' about."

"Tell us about some of yore shootin' scrapes," hollered another. "Tell us about the time you downed them three bank robbers at Fargo."

Dishrag smiled. Fargo—Abilene—Kingfisher—Caldwell. He knew the details of the town tamer's experiences in those places as well as if they had happened to him. Years before he had seen Prairie Dan, the time he had been called to Deadwood. There had been no shooting, nothing. For Prairie Dan and the town council hadn't been able to get together. But he had never forgotten the great man, had read and reread accounts of his exploits until he could recite them from memory.

And so he talked, living over the amazing spectacle Prairie Dan had staged for the Fargo folks. Telling it in the first person as an expression of his gratitude to Marshal Rufe Appling. They listened attentively, swapping grins of skeptical amusement, tempered by a silent admission of the entertainment he was affording them.

He went from one exploit to another, modestly playing down his own part in each, yet masterfully bringing out the great danger he had conquered with his blazing guns. And when he had just about covered the ground; apologizing for taking up so much of their time, they rebelled against an ending of the show.

Sanders, the cowboy, said: "Now hold on, Benton. Show us how you shuck a cutter. Le's have a look at yore draw."

Dishrag protested, but their roar of approval cut him off. Sanders had stripped off his gun belt and was whipping it around the swamper's shrunken middle. He had to punch a new hole in the leather to make it hang around Dishrag's hipless frame, but now he stood back and they were silent, eying him hungrily, ready to be convinced.

Dishrag stood there, prey to an exaggerated sense of having failed.

Now they would know that Rufe Appling had lied. His right elbow was angled, lifting his hand until it hung, clawlike above the butt of the gun. They didn't know that the elbow was permanently stiff, that any draw he might make would be only a caricature.

Their staring faces swam before his vision, then were blotted out as almost forgotten pictures of the past filled his brain. He was thirteen years old, filled with a youngster's wild hunger to own a horse, saddle, gun and to hold down a job as cow-puncher. The horse he had earned pitching hay. The saddle and gear he had acquired from a saddle maker's junkpile, paying a small charge by doing odd jobs around the saddle shop. The second-hand .44 and a box of shells had come harder—costing him six month's spare time labor in the hardware store. But it all paid off when he landed a job as night jingler with a wagon outfit, during beef gather.

Disaster had come when he laid his twine on a big steer that was bolting from the cut. The brute pulled him and his scrubby pony down, and that was the last Dishrag had known for ten days. It was a miracle that he lived at all, the medico had said. And, because doctors were mostly veterinary jacklegs in those days, he had been left with a twisted leg, a stiff elbow, an injury to his spine that always ached when the weather changed, and a bashed-in chest that left him short-winded. His dreams of cowboying were over and life hadn't been very glamorous after that.

Slowly faces took form again and Dishrag noticed that their eyes were on his crooked elbow, awe-filled, lacking the doubt of minutes before. And he heard a voice he could hardly recognize as his own.

"Sorry, gents," he said. "I'd like to accommodate you. But when I hung on my first gun, my dad made me promise I'd never draw it unless I meant to kill a man. I've kept that promise and I can't bust it now."

IN the days that followed, Dishrag Benton was tempted many times to peg the hoax for what it was. Two things deterred him. First there was Rufe Appling. The marshal enjoyed the confidence of all the people. That trust, by Dishrag's reasoning, would be weakened if they suddenly decided he was a liar. The other thing was the pleasure the swamper felt at being noticed. It didn't matter that men talked with him mainly to trick him into some confession that would betray his act. He could understand their skepticism and was always on his guard. And he knew too much of Prairie Bill's history to be trapped. Such things as he didn't know, he told so convincingly that in their own ignorance they could find no loopholes in them.

Dishrag had occasion to regret his play-acting the night Hays Hodapp came to town with his wild Flying H crew. Hodapp ran a questionable spread out in the Hanging Hills and about him hung an aura of legend. He was reputed to be hell-on-wheels with a gun and rumor had it that he had killed fifteen men. It was whispered that half the rustling in the county could be charged off to the night-riding of the Flying H. But, though charges had been brought against him, Hodapp had always gone free for lack of evidence. His cows were said to throw twin calves consistently and his bulls to give birth to offspring every other year.

This night the big desperado came whirling into Caprock City, his men

behind him whooping and shooting at the stars. They came barging into the Congress Saloon, bawling for liquor and completely dominating the place. When they had downed their trail drinks and washed them down with two or three more, Hodapp placed his back to the bar and looked the patronage over with a daring grin.

"Where's that great man?" he bawled. "Where's the great gun-fightin' badge-toter that's swampin' out this saloon?"

All eyes went to Dishrag where he stood behind his lunch counter. And he trembled as the desperado's glance found him.

"So-o-o!" A savage humor shook Hodapp. "Yo're the gent, eh? Come here!" And when the little swamper hesitated: "Come on; don't be scairt. I wanta talk to you."

With dragging steps Dishrag went to him. Fear held him, and cruelly it bent him to the will of the Flying H boss.

"Y-yes sir," he gulped, when he stood before the man. "What you want?"

A sneer twisted the big bully's lips. "What do I want, he asks. I'll tell yuh, gunnie. I want you to tell these folks that you lied through yore teeth. You—Prairie Dan Benton! That's a laugh. Prairie Dan was six foot four, if he was an inch."

"I suppose you side-parded Prairie Bill in most of his gun fights, eh, Hodapp?" A quiet voice struck from the entrance and Rufe Appling stood there, scowling with impatience. "I suppose you'll claim him an' you was thicker'n thieves. Ain't there nobody nor nothin' that you don't know all about, Hodapp?"

The renegade cowman shot him a hateful look. "Keep yore bill outa this, marshal," he warned, "or me an' you'll stage a smoky swarray for

the folks. You can't help run no sandy like this onto me. Hell, I've heard Prairie Bill was a wampood-lin' big man, about four foot across the pants. Furthermore, I heard he died in Wichita two-three years ago of pneumonia." His eyes flashed back to the swamper. "Tell 'em you lied, you little seed wart, before I decide to slap some truth into you. Yo're lyin', ain't you?"

Dishrag cast a fearful glance at the calm marshal, caught some hidden message there that stiffened him. "N-no," he said, stubbornly. "I'm not lyin'."

The cowman's long arm snaked out, caught Dishrag by his skinny throat, drew him close. "Don't gimme none of that hogwash, feller." He shook him like a rat. "Now come clean an' admit you was just feedin' the town a lot of pap. Come on now, give up head."

It was useless to struggle in that cruel grip. In fact, Dishrag couldn't have admitted the lie had he wished to, so tight were those steel fingers on his windpipe.

"Won't, eh?" rasped Hodapp. "All right, you asked for it—"

He spun Dishrag about, caught him by the hand and hoisted it up his back. The swamper cried out faintly, as the agony of the hammer-lock struck through him. He closed his eyes, ground his teeth. Then shock was pouring through him as flesh crashed against flesh; the damning pressure was off his arm and he was falling. From the floor he saw Hodapp backed up against the bar, holding a hand to his jaw and glaring bloody murder at Rufe Appling, who stood quietly before him.

"Hodapp," said the marshal, smiling icily, "if you keep picking on little gents in this town, I'm going to lost my patience."

Anger swept the Flying H man like a tide. "You said the wrong thing, Appling," he ground out, taking a step forward and poisoning his hand for the draw. "Jerk yore gun."

The lawman shook his head. "No, feller. When I cross smoke with you, it won't be for something personal. Peel yore bark; I want to show the boys what a four-flushing blowhard you are."

A low roar guttered from Hodapp's throat. A savage grin warped his broad face and he was shedding his gun belt. The marshal matched the move, pressing his weapon into the hands of a spectator. They were both big men, Hodapp slightly heavier of build, Appling patently a few years younger and more agile.

The marshal advanced and the burly desperado circled, his knuckles showing white with tension. They came together, sparring carefully, testing one another. Then, with unguessed quickness, Hodapp blasted a hard right to Appling's ear, hurling him off balance. A roar went up from the swelling crowd and Dishrag, on his feet now, screamed warnings at his champion as the Flying H man roared in with wind-milling fists.

The marshal ducked under the wild swings, settled his head between his shoulders and lashed a hard shot to Hodapp's belly. It was a tender place, as the man's wince betrayed. Appling hit him again in the bread basket, wringing a gasp from him, and Dishrag screamed his joy, his small, blue-veined fists duplicating the lawman's every parry and stroke. When Hodapp's guard dropped and Appling laid an over-hand swing on his jaw, Dishrag's swing was right with him. He hit a howling spectator before him and the man shoved him away, glaring.

Plainly hurt, Hodapp clawed his

way into a clinch and hung on, with the marshal lacing jarring uppercuts into his face. As Hodapp broke, the marshal smashed him back onto his heels and the desperado cursed, spitting blood. Boring in, he plastered Applling with a roundhouse blow to the ribs. It doubled the marshal up, drove him back. And the little swamper was backing too, his face showing all the marshal's agony—until he stepped on a man's toes and was cursed for his clumsiness.

Applling faded out of harm's way, drew a long breath and attacked again, rocking the desperado's face with a stabbing left hand. Now he was all right again and plainly aroused. He drew blood from Hodapp's nose with his left. He smashed him on the ear with his right. The Flying H man pulled up his arms to protect his face and Applling brought up an uppercut, exploding it on Hodapp's chin. The man's knees buckled.

He weaved in his tracks, his hands down, his great head shaking crazily. And the lawman was merciless. Right, left, right, left. Jaw and belly, jaw and belly. The desperado swayed like a tree and Applling measured him. Like a rocket his right caromed off Hodapp's jaw, with a sound like a meat axe cleaving bone. The bully wavered, swayed, then fell forward. He lay still. And in the awed silence of the crowd, Dishrag's yell of joy rang eerily. He rushed in, threw his arms about the marshal and hugged him.

A WEEK went by, seven days during which Dishrag Benton was kept busy telling the story of the great fight to those who had not witnessed it. After the closing on Friday night, Dishrag worked industriously, sweeping up, scattering clean sawdust, emptying the spit-

toons and preparing his counter for tomorrow's big trade. It was nearing dawn when he finished. He was weary, but he was happy. He had hummed and whistled as he worked. And now, as he made his way to his little sleeping cubby off the bar-room, he executed a little jig of joy. He was changed. Life had come to have a meaning.

He slept soundly, as always, relying upon the battered alarm clock to wake him about sundown—in time for the nightly awakening of business. Trouble crept into his dreams, making him restless. Rousing, he made out an insistent pounding on his door. He growled an order for it to stop, pulled the covers over his head to shut it out. But it didn't stop. And men were calling his name. Dishrag bounced up, glanced at the clock. Early yet—only four thirty. What the—

"Benton . . . Benton, open up!" The fools were pounding the door off its hinges. "Hurry! Wake up! It's urgent!"

Somewhere in the town a gun started echoes. Another. Others. Wild yells. Suddenly alarmed, Dishrag leaped up, pulled on his pants and boots and turned the key in the lock. Three excited, white-faced men filed in. Dishrag gave before them, awed that they should be calling him. Mayor Matt Burgess, Commissioner Kurt Gibson and County Supervisor Link Temple were important men in Caprock City. As far as the swamper knew, they had never noticed him before. Behind them, filling the doorway, stood Pat Gibbons, his boss.

"Benton, sit down." The unsteady hands of Mayor Burgess were on him, forcing him down on the bed. "You've got to help us. Oh, I know what you'll say, that you're under cover here and out of circula-

tion. But we need you, man. You're the only one we can turn to now. Say you'll serve us in our great need."

"Me?" Dishrag stammered. "Help you?" He swung his head to include them all. "What you want I should do?"

"The town is scared stiff, Benton. Not a man with nerve enough left to lift a hand. You see, there was a disturbance down in the Longhorn Saloon. Rufe Appling went down to quiet it. He's lying dead now and—"

"Dead?" Dishrag leaped up, howling. He knew a moment of honest grief and rage. "Who . . . who shot him?"

"Hays Hodapp! He's been drinking in there all day and—"

"Hodapp!" Fear was in the swamper now, as he began to get the first inkling why these great men were here. "And you want me to—"

"You're the only one who dares face him, Benton. You've had experience with his kind. You know what to do in a case like this. Listen, he's got this town treed. Listen to him!" Gunblasts and yells rocked Caprock City again. "Him and his men are down there, drunk and on the shoot. Throwing lead at anything and anybody that shows. Tell us you'll pin on the star and serve us, Mr. Benton. We need you."

Dishrag was gaping, making funny sounds in his throat. A tremor shook him and his head wagged from side to side, negatively. "Gents, I'd like to . . . to do it for you, but—"

"Poor Rufe," mourned the mayor. "He spoke so highly of you. At the very last when we warned him to be careful, he smiled in his slow, friendly way and said he couldn't be too careful, because Prairie Dan

Benton was watching him—from the Congress."

A thrill shot through Dishrag, stiffened him. "He . . . he said that?"

"That's right, Benton. Reconsider, won't you? A lot of lives are at stake, and—"

"But—but I sold my guns," complained Dishrag, reaching for straws.

Three gun belts unsnapped. Three weapons were tendered him. Dishrag had a sudden inspiration. It wasn't fair to send a man into battle with strange guns and without practice. But he couldn't voice the refusal. No great marshal would have hidden behind such a hedge. And, unless he proved as great now as Rufe Appling had pictured him, he cast a blot upon the memory of his friend.

"I . . . I'll see what can be done," he muttered. "Now get out and let me be."

"Good boy, Dan!" It was Gibbons speaking from the doorway. "I knew you wouldn't let the town down. Come on, men. Let him handle it his own way."

They went out, closing the door almost reverently. A great stillness had settled over the town as Dishrag fastened the smaller of the three belts about his waist. A shudder shook him and he tried to draw the gun, even as he had tried as a button, after working out the price of his first Colt's gun. He got the pistol out, but it was a labored draw, completed only by lowering his right shoulder grotesquely.

Dishrag's brain raced. He didn't have a chance and he knew it. Yet by now the word had gone out that Prairie Dan, the town tamer, was about to engage the drunken desperado. Gibbons, his boss, had called him Dan. And he could feel Rufe Appling at his side, urging him

not to let them remember him as a liar!

The swamper squared his shoulders, let himself out into the bar-room. Men stared at him as he walked toward the slatted front doors, with his crazy, twisted stride. Frightened men, whose eyes held a dogged look of worship. And it came to Dishrag with a shock that doubt had left them in their need; their hope now was father to the belief that he was Prairie Dan Benton. They were depending on him and he—he must not let them down.

At the door, Dishrag paused, cast a birdlike glance along the street, right and left. The walks were deserted. The racks had been emptied of rigs and saddle ponies. Hopeful that maybe Hodapp and his Flying H hellions had forked their bronses and fogged it from the town, the swamper stepped outside and across the walk. He let himself off the boards and moved past the rack. Then he was halting, freezing in his tracks. A wild, ribald yell beat high. The door of the Longhorn Saloon smashed outward and Hays Hodapp emerged, a bottle of whiskey in one hand, his gun in the other. Behind him came his men—a dozen of them, drunk and riotous.

The desperado's pistol flamed and a window pane crashed downward in broken shards. Then Hodapp saw Dishrag, planted there in the street, and something happened to him. He seemed to deflate. His jaw sagged in amazement. He dropped his bottle and stared, unbelieving. His men too were strangely affected at sight of that frail figure facing them with a calmness that was really the paralysis of fright.

For what seemed an age, that tableau held. And the town held its breath. After a while, without shift-

ing his eyes, Hodapp waved his hand.

"Get off the street," he told his men. "Yonder's the little squirt that calls himself Prairie Dan Benton. Him an' me has got a few little points to clear up." And he jammed his smoking gun down into its leather.

A SHUDDER ran through Dishrag as the Flying H men moved to the walk and clustered there. The swamper knew it was his move. It was shooting time, dying time for him. The thought strengthened rather than weakened him. And the thing that brought a faint smile to his lips was that seeing him killed out here on the street, making his bold and desperate play, the men of the town might be unshackled from their fear and make an end of these renegades. That, and the thought that in dying he would again be with his friend, Rufe Appling, where they could laugh together at the joke that he was Prairie Dan.

Dishrag didn't remember starting. But suddenly he found himself moving along the axis of the street toward the planted desperado. Slowly, deliberately, his steps measured and unhurried. That great, brutal form, the contorted savage face, the readiness of Hodapp's gun hand—all those things swam before his vision. But, to the swamper, it was like looking at an ugly picture of some thing that had happened long, long ago. Strangely, it stirred no fear in him, for he was more concerned with the tread of boots on either side of him. He could hear them plainly, though he dared not shift his glance. Tramp, tramp, tramp sounded the tread of boots, matching his steps.

The one on his right—that would be Rufe Appling. Somehow Dish-

rag took that for granted. But the other? A chill laid its clammy fingers along his spine. That heavy, dominant tread, the strange presence that stirred anger, where only fear should have been in his skinny chest, could that be Prairie Dan Benton?

From the open doorway of the Mercantile store, the echo of an awed whisper fell: "Look at him! No wonder they call him the town tamer! Look at the way he carries his hand, crooked an' ready. Hold yore hats, boys."

A tremor of near humor shook Dishrag. "Crooked an' ready!" His lips made the words sound like a chuckle. They had looked at that crook in his arm every day, in scorn. Now they were making it something it wasn't, leaning upon it, weighing it in the light of adulation.

The distance narrowed. Fifty yards. Forty. Thirty. Hodapp's shoulders were settling.

"Stop comin' or stop lead!" he croaked, and he was swaying to the left.

"Bad man," said Dishrag, just as he had repeated Prairie Dan's words, telling of that affair in Kingfisher, "don't make me kill you. Lift your hands."

"Draw, damn you!" Hodapp almost screamed it. "Pull yore gun an' I'll fit you for a coffin."

"I want you, Hodapp." Less than twenty yards separated them now. "Put up your hands or make your fight." Prairie Dan had put it that way, while stalking a terrorist in Abilene.

Hays Hodapp gave backward a step, flung up his left hand, protestingly. "Hold on, Prairie Dan!" he cried. "Le's talk this over."

It poured through Dishrag's senses like a warming tide, seeming to im-

bue him with an unguessed power. The desperado had convinced himself of his earlier error. He believed the swamper was the great town tamer. There was a depth and command to Dishrag's voice that he himself couldn't recognize.

"Pitch up, Hodapp. Time for talk is past." Ten yards. Five yards. The eyes of the Flying H man were writhing.

"Cripes!" he yelled. "If I cave, they'll lynch me."

"If they try it," answered the swamper, without slackening pace, "I'll give you your gun and we'll shoot it out with 'em. Hands up."

A murmuring ran the length of the silent street. Hodapp hesitated, casting a desperate glance at his men. They were staring, transfixed with awe. The desperado didn't put up his hands, even though Dishrag was pausing only a stride before him. For a brief moment, two men stared into each other's eyes. Both scared. Each reaching out for guidance as to his next move. Hodapp probed an unknown, deeply dyed with the saffron hue of fear. Dishrag had his old legends of Prairie Dan to sustain him. He couldn't have made much of a fist of drawing with his right. But his left, strengthened by usage, made short work of unbuckling Hodapp's gun belt and whipping it free.

"Now, Hodapp," he said in that same strained, unnatural voice. "Get moving. You're going down to the jailhouse. And you"—he flung a savage look at the clustered Flying H men—"get out of town. If you're here when I come out of that jail, somebody's going to die."

Brazenly, he turned his back to them, matching strides with the tamed bad man. A roar seemed to shake the town and the street was suddenly alive with townsmen.

They surged toward him, some calling for a rope. Not until then did the little swamper execute his bizarre draw. It stopped them in their tracks. And, in the ensuing silence, Dishrag's voice crackled, just as Prairie Dan's had that time in Fargo.

"Back, boys. He's answering now to the law. I'll kill the first man who tries to take him from me. Now behave yourselves."

They followed along, docile enough, forming a milling half moon to watch Dishrag jail his prisoner. When he emerged, they let loose a great roar that drowned out the drumming of hoofs as the Flying H men quit Caprock City. They crowded about him, reaching for his hands, pommeling him, praising him with the highest superlatives. Actually threatening to trample him

under in a stampede of mass gratitude.

Through the crush came Mayor Matt Burgess and Pat Gibbons, elbowing men aside savagely.

"Back!" the mayor was roaring. "Get back, all of you. What you trying to do, tear him to pieces?" Then as they fell back, leaving Dishrag breathless and shaken, the mayor was pumping his hand. "Great work, marshal. The finest exhibition of sheer courage I've ever witnessed. You're all they've said of you, Dan, and . . . and if there's any way . . . if the town can raise enough money to interest you in taking the badge and doing what poor Rufe couldn't do, I . . . we—"

He faltered, his eyes pleading. And over his shoulder, Big Pat Gibbons was beaming at Dishrag and nodding his head confidently.

THE END.

THE REASON FOR CONCHOS

CONTRARY to general belief, the ornaments used on bridles are not there solely for the purpose of decoration. In the first place there is a distinct advantage in being able to identify one's own bridle quickly. If a man has decided to ride a certain horse the following day, and, because that horse had a big head he had adjusted the headstall to fit him, he may find himself in trouble if he hastily grabs up the wrong bridle.

Many old-time riders cut their brands, or perhaps their initials, in the brow band or cheek pieces of their bridles. These could be readily traced by the feel, and so identified, no matter how dark the night.

A very popular concho is a piece of heavy convex glass over a porcelain plate on which letters, and even portraits, have been painted, and since the discovery of radium, illuminated conchos have come into use. These would have been of questionable value in the days of the Texas trail herds, when great caution was necessary in order to guard against stampedes. If a horse with blazing conchos on his bridle had cantered up to bed ground in those times, things would doubtless have popped in more ways than one.

Undoubtedly the fanciful silver and gold-plated conchos now seen on some bridles are merely decoration, but the fact remains that the concho at one time was as much a matter of utility as any part of the bridle, and it even played an important part in the tragedies of the West. The guilt of a famous outlaw was proven by the concho he had taken from the horse ridden by his victim, and a stolen remuda recovered when a man recognized the concho belonging to a friend in another State.



FAMOUS PROSPECTORS

GEORGE JACKSON

by JOHN A. THOMPSON

No single prospector ever made richer mining history for Colorado than George Jackson. Tall, handsome, this bronzed young giant who was all sinew and leather-tough muscle found gold by the hatful where he had always thought it should be—in the Rockies west of Denver.

Prospectors come in all shapes and sizes; tall and short, fat and lean. George was built like a fic-

tion hero, and he had a personality to match. Down in Santa Fé when young Jackson lived there with his cousin, Kit Carson, the Mexicans of the day meant it when they said George Jackson was the dam' bes' looking gringo that ever attended a Saturday night baille. But George was no dude. An expert rifleman, all around trapper and woodsman, he rode like an Indian

and could be bested in but a few of the rough and tumble sports of the day, even to open-handed bear wrestling.

Born in 1832 in Glasgow, Missouri, out near the edge of the western frontier it was only natural that George's imagination should be fired early with the wonders of the wilderness. Besides he had the stories of his cousin Kit Carson to listen to, enough to arouse the latent wanderlust and love of adventure in any red-blooded American youngster. He was just a stripling when he made his first trip to Santa Fe where he was to live with Kit, and it was from that famous pioneer and blood relation that George Jackson learned both the rudiments and the finer points of Western lore.

Jackson soon became an expert in his own right, and when California's great gold rush of '49 began, he was in the vanguard of the hordes that hurried clear across a continent of untamed miles in search of gold. He worked some of the American river bars and made money. The latter was soon spent, but the knowledge of gold and gold placering that he gained those first few years formed the groundwork of his later skill as a prospector. Moreover that first gold mining venture clinched his destiny. From then on the lure of gold was part and parcel of his make-up and a fortune in yellow metal his dream of ultimate success.

The dream came true. George Jackson was determined that it should. But before it did the tall, good-looking young frontiersman had many thrilling adventures. In 1857 he acted as guide and scout for the troops sent out to quell a Mormon uprising in Utah. A year later, after sandwiching in a short hunting trip to Fort Laramie,

Wyoming, he started the venture that was to catapult him definitely into the mining history of Colorado.

For some time Jackson had had the conviction that there was gold in the Rockies. Legend said so, of course, but he was backing his conviction on something stronger than that. He kept adding up in his mind his knowledge of gold placering gained in California, and his personal familiarity with the mineral formations of the Rockies, picked up on trapping and hunting trips in the then virgin wilderness of those towering crags. The answer, as far as Jackson was concerned, was always the same. There was gold in the Rockies. The thing to do was find it.

PURCHASING a pack load of trade goods he set out for Smith's trading post on Cherry Creek. Profit on a prospecting trip might be problematical, but Indian trading to one who knew the game as well as Jackson did was a sure-fire method of making an adequate grubstake out of a meager one.

At the post Jackson picked up two partners, Tom Golden and an Indian named Black Hawk. They camped where the town of Golden has since become one of Colorado's famous mining landmarks. The trio however, decided to push on further westward into the hills in spite of the fact that it was winter and snow covered the ground. Finally Golden and Black Hawk decided that considering the season, and their equipment they had gone far enough. They were for spending the winter where they were, hunting and trapping. In the spring prospecting could be continued. Jackson didn't argue.

"All right," he said, "it's a free

country. You fellows stay here. I'm going on up to Clear Creek. That's where the gold is. I'm sure of it."

He took a blanket, a cup, a little camp bread and some coffee. Then he picked up his rifle, checked the ammunition he was taking with him and started off alone. His partners said they would wait where they were until he got back.

Building rough pine-bough shelters to sleep in at night, huddling under the protection of a dense grove of trees when it snowed and the wind blew, shooting wild goats or mountain sheep, and sun-curing the meat in thin strips, Jackson moved on towards his destination. One man against the Rockies, and in mid-winter at that. He prospected where he could as he traveled. Only a few colors rewarded his efforts. Nothing that would enable him to go back to companions and tell him he had found the bonanza for which he was looking.

As his scant food supply shrunk until he had only the dried meat from the game he killed, common sense told Jackson to retrace his steps, to go back to camp and hole up with his partners until spring. It was the sensible thing to do. But he wouldn't go back, at least not until he had prospected Clear Creek, the stream that had been his objective all along.

At last he turned up Clear Creek, following it until he came to a likely gravel bar. His first job was to build a huge bonfire to thaw out the frozen gravel. When he was able to rake away the embers, he scooped up some of the thawed muck and panned it in the icy waters of the stream.

Numbed fingers, his scant food supply, the hardships of his lonely trail through the mountains were all

forgotten as Jackson watched the streamer of golden yellow colors left behind the black sand in his cup, the only utensil he had with him for panning. He found a nugget, then some more. Tiny angular stones of pure gold the size of dried peas.

AS he stood up from his cramped position a grin of triumph spread across Jackson's face. Now he could go back and tell his companions that he had been right. Hunch and knowledge had been vindicated. There was gold, fortunes of it, in the bed of Clear Creek.

His dream was no longer hope or fantasy. It was an accomplished fact. A million dollars in Rocky Mountain gold lay at his feet. Yes, many millions. He thought of the things money would buy. A farm for the folks back home in Glasgow, Missouri. A mansion, fine horses, and city clothes to replace the tattered, fringe-trimmed buckskins that he had made himself.

He checked and double-checked. Every cup of dirt brought more colors, turned up fresh nuggets.

With no tools or supplies, it was necessary to return to the spot where Golden and Black Hawk were camped. The back trail was difficult but the glow of his discovery carried him on. Though he had been gone almost a month, his partners were not worried. George Jackson was too good a mountain man to get lost in the wilderness.

Golden was cooking supper—bacon, beans and sourdough biscuits—when Jackson returned to camp. Automatically he reached into the dish cupboard for another plate.

"How did you make out, George?" Golden asked, returning his attention to the sizzling bacon.

"Wait till I eat first," replied Jackson as casually as if he had just come back from a five-minute stroll in the woods. "I'm shore hungry."

After supper he exploded his bombshell. Bonanza gold on Clear Creek! He showed his partners the gold he had been able to wash from the gravel with no other utensil than a tin cup.

"I reckon spring'll be soon enough to go back and get the gold," declared Jackson, concluding his story.

"I reckon," agreed Tom Golden. Black Hawk simply nodded.

"We'll get some men with capital and go in and work the claims right," Jackson went on.

Golden looked up from his pipe. "I don't hold with you there, George," he said sharply. "I aim to take out my own gold myself without help from outsiders."

Black Hawk neither chose sides nor expressed his own opinion. But the argument that later ensued on the question of interesting outsiders with money to go in and open up Clear Creek eventually caused the break-up of the partnership between Jackson and Golden. Each stuck to his own course. Yet when Golden argued that he did not think Jackson should divulge the secret of the whereabouts of the bonanza to any new persons, Jackson agreed. And he kept his word. True, that spring he was back in the Rockies, with him a new partner known as Big Phil, and the two were leading a group of wealthy men from Chicago to one of the richest placer diggings

ever discovered in Colorado's golden streams. Though there were twenty-two men all told in the party that traveled in by wagon train, only one amongst them knew their actual destination, and that was Jackson. Even Big Phil went along on his say-so. He like the others, had implicit faith in George Jackson's honesty!

"George's word's as good as 'ary gold mine I ever seen," declared Big Phil.

And it was. When the party reached the carefully marked spot on Clear Creek where Jackson had first found his gold, they took the wagons apart for the boards in them. With the boards they made sluice boxes and set about washing the richly gold-laden gravel in earnest. The ground was so rich they had to stop work at frequent intervals and clean up the yellow metal that accumulated in little heaps in front of the riffles. Within a day or so they had more than five thousand dollars' worth of gold sacked and stored away.

Later newcomers straggled in. Then there was a stampede. In time the Clear Creek country was dotted with bonanza gold camps. At Idaho Springs, Georgetown, Empire, and even Central City. Rich quartz veins were the second great gold discovery in the neighborhood. All told more than one hundred million dollars worth of gold has come from this particular sector of the Rockies. And a lone mountain man, George Jackson found it first.

THE END.



LORD OF THE HERD



By DAVE LOGAN

It was in the air; it was everywhere. It was something that came to him down wind, something as deadly as a rattler's fang. It was in his nostrils, in that stirring silver mane that rippled down his blue, arched neck. His luminous calico eyes blazed; his nostrils quivered.

He stood in the canyon on a red pinnacle of rock above the sand-ringed waterhole where his herd of thirty mares and their colts were drinking. Above him loomed the Paint Lands of the Rio, one colored bench land upon another reaching toward a blue sky that had just begun to flame with rays from the sun stealing up beyond the broken hills and shaggy cliffs.

Deadly peril was making itself known, and no wild stallion in all the country could have recognized it quicker than Blue Danger, the stallion that had been sired by Silver Devil, the mustang, and a Kentucky thoroughbred that had broken from the corrals of a rich rancher to come romancing into the herd one midsummer night a few months before a hunter's rifle ball had killed the white king of the herd.

Blue Danger stamped his forehoofs and snorted, a signal for the mares and playful colts down there in the water to look alive for trouble. Then the down-wind scent came a little stronger.

A trick was about to be played. Blue Danger did not yet recognize it as a trick. In the five years he had run at the head of his herd—holding his place with the sheer courage and fighting ability necessary to meet and whip all comers—he had encountered many tricks and traps laid for him by the two-legged creatures who farmed the Paint Lands for horsehides; men who came with giant wagons to shoot and kill

like buffalo hunters of old, leaving the skinned carcasses of horses and mares scattered over hills, canyons, and valleys.

Like all tricks, it broke rapidly once it had started. In a few moments Blue Danger saw the maker of the scent, and heard its wild outburst of fiendish braying almost at the same instant. It was an enormous jackass suddenly appearing in the mouth of a gorge two hundred yards away.

From the first it was a certainty that the animal belonged to none of the ordinary burro family. He was a high-headed, tail-twisting, cloudy-gray animal, a breed of the faraway Tennessee big mule and hilly country—and one of the most deadly dangerous customers any stallion could face.

AN' now for some hang-dang good shootin', Reck," Butch Homer spoke to the thin, hatchet-faced man at his left and slid his old buffalo rifle through the dense brush and rocks on top of the canyon down wind from the waterhole. Home's bearded face was streaked with a tobacco-stained grin and wrinkles crawling through the rolls of fat. In a moment they would be ready to start hurling bullets down into the herd four hundred yards away.

"This is what I call outsmartin' the Blue Danger 'imself," he chuckled. "I allus said I could do it, Reck. An' yuh thought I was crazy when I bought that damn jackass from the homesteader, but it takes a Shotgun Crick Homer to see opportunity."

"I knowed yuh owned a jack once." Reck Wallby squirted a streak of tobacco spittle at a bush a yard away and eased his heavy rifle forward. "I know, too, that a

man don't ever own a jack but one time. They're the meanest, most cussed things on the face of the earth, but now I see what was on yore mind when yuh got a second one."

"Just usin' my brains," gloated Homer. "All one of the boys had to do was to ooze down that gorge at the right moment an' turn that damn jack loose. First thing he smelled was them mares an' the stallion. The smell of Blue Danger alone would 'a' been enough. Ain't nothin' what hates each other worse than a jack an' a stallion. Now the jack is loose an' on his way. Here he comes, tail in the air an' a-twist in'. He'll hit the Blue Danger in a minute. They'll start to fight. We'll open up. The mares an' colts are gonna be so addled they won't know which way to run, havin' no leader to lead 'em. Watch all I say pan out, Reck. But I want that Blue Danger alive if the jack don't kill 'im. That hoss is worth a chunk of money. I'd crease-shoot 'im an' knock 'im out if I could get close enough, but that hoss is almost as smart as me."

He looked behind him. Over there beyond a ridge three enormous wagons were waiting. One of them was already half loaded with hides. A good Shotgun Creek Homer got them when and where he could. All hides were better in the late fall or early spring, but a man who knew his business took hides when and where he could, and soon got himself used to the smell.

And today was a day of days, one that had been planned for several weeks while Butch Homer and his unshaved, rough-looking crowd had studied the habits and movements of Blue Danger and his herd. Twenty extra Indians had been hired at a dollar-fifty each, and they were

right now in place with their ponies.

Once the race after Blue Danger started it would be hell. But the Indians would run that fool hoss down! Those red riders were the pick of the Paint Lands, and their ponies were as tough as a man could find. They had to be for this job.

If Blue Danger made his getaway from the jack before the riders could close in on him, he would head like hell's bells a-ringin' for the most dangerous part of all the Paint Lands. But the Indians were scattered out to the east and west and spaced three miles apart. Once they set on Blue Danger's trail they would keep him on the run until he dropped from sheer exhaustion. Then those redskins who had lasted until the end of the race would close in. The ropes would go on; that was the proper way to run down a wild hoss that refused to be lured into trick corrals and blind canyons where a concealed gate would drop behind him and his herd.

"Look at that jack come!" whispered Wallby.

"An' look at Blue Danger swingin' off that hump to meet 'im!" Homer exclaimed. "I'll bet if us an' the Indians kept out of it we'd see the damnest fight there ever was between a big Tennessee jackass an' a wild stud hoss! But hold yore fire an' just be ready to start the smoke rollin' when I give the word. We want 'em at it hot an' heavy before we open the show."

THEN Blue Danger was going into it, not yet aware that he and his herd were about to be the victims of a cunning plot; not knowing that his habits had been watched for days by hidden men on top of the distant hills. He was going off the pinnacle like a bullet, and

that cloudy-gray shape was coming on.

The jack was like a devil on the move, like something coming with one eye cocked toward the mares and the other on Blue Danger. His wild braying was now filling the hills with that fierce *Haw-aw-yink!*—*Haw-aw-yink!*-ing.

When Blue Danger was thirty yards from the jack he plunged to a stiff-legged halt. His head was up. A stronger blowing of the wind rolled his silver mane down the arched neck, flapping it like a war banner. Never had he been forced to fight a jack. Never had he seen one like this, but he instinctively knew that it would be a battle to the death. The little jack burros of the hills had never given him trouble. Not one of them had ever brought a challenging whistle from him.

But he whistled now. It was as fierce and far-reaching a sound as the sharp notes of a bugle blowing. It did not daunt the jack, did not cause him to miss a stride. This was the grand opportunity for war, and the jack was a warrior from the tips of those huge ears to the tassel on the end of his black tail. In the flash of an eye he was closing in, and then stallion and jack were sparring for a hold.

Blue Danger did not make the usual stallion charge—a wild-eyed dash with his head down. From Silver Dell he had inherited his natural-born fighting tricks. He had all of Silver Dell's surefootedness, especially when fighting on dangerous ground, and with every muscle tensed and quivering he slipped neatly to the right and left.

He went into it like a warrior with the jack sparring for a jack's favorite hold, a grip on the back of the neck. Blue Danger let him come in close, then brushed him out of the

way with a side-smashing blow from his wheeling rump. Before the jack could come back, Blue Danger slammed a lightning hind kick with both feet going straight to the ribs.

The jack kicked. His hoofs were shod with iron and he could deal a wicked blow, but Blue Danger avoided it, plunging quickly out of the way and whirling even while he was in the air. That brought him back face to face with his enemy.

The jack was charging when Blue Danger reared like a flash in the air and struck out with both forefeet.

It might have tricked another fighting stallion, but the jack was quick enough to sling his head to one side. As Blue Danger came down to all four feet, it looked like slaughter. The jack again lunged straight in with his mouth wide open.

Like a snarling wolf's head, Blue Danger's muzzle now plunged to its target. He caught the jack on his long nose and just above the flaring nostrils. It was a grip that would have taken a man's hand off, but Blue Danger was not yet done. Once his grip was fastened, he went up in another quick rear, the lightning hoofs flying out, striking the jack down across the shoulders, splitting the cloudy-gray hide to the bone and bringing the first rush of the hot red blood.

In this fashion the battle would be fought. The fighting king of the Paint Lands had his grip. He would not lose it. He struck again and again. Suddenly he had the jack down. It was his opportunity. He shot in, smashing down both forehoofs to the jack's head, and then leaped clear just as a crash of guns seemed to roll down from the canyon rim to southward.

Out of the corners of his eye, Blue

Danger saw one of the mares jerk into a sudden knot of agony. He saw her plunge to the ground, try desperately to get up, and fall back. One of his colts fell an instant later, a small one with markings like Blue Danger's.

Death was on the rush here. A second mare threw up her head, a sudden spasm of pain gripping her. She tried to lunge forward. Her knees gave away. She went down on her nose with her colt bawling in terror beside her.

Blue Danger whistled, and then saw that the dazed jack was getting up. The stallion did not wait. He plunged again, and caught the jack on the head with two of those lightning forefoot strokes, and then leaped out of the way, his whistling rushing up and up the canyon like a wild trumpeting.

Then the herd was on the move, the mares and colts following Blue Danger with the growing noise of the wildly hammering hoofs making the canyon walls and surrounding hills rumble and ring as if thunder were shaking the earth.

A bawl of agony and terror lifted out of the din. Another mare was going down. A weaker cry sounded. The colt that had darted to its mother's side had turned back after once starting away with the herd. Now his spindly legs folded as the little fellow went down with a bullet in him.

Blue Danger whistled again to the herd, then whirled back, nipping at the rumps of the lagging. Another mare went down. He nipped at her, trying to make her get up, and the smell of blood filled his nostrils. He swung away, knowing quick death when he saw it, and racing on with the others, his mane rolling, silver tail a wind-bannering flag in the air.

FOUR mares an' two fine colts, if I don't miss my countin' down there." Butch Homer stood up, wiping great beads of perspiration from his forehead as he walked to the rim of the canyon and stood there looking at the fleeing herd that was now out of rifle range. "We oughta got more."

"Yuh waited too long 'fore openin' up," Reck Wallby growled as he stumbled to his feet with his heavy rifle in his hands and stamped his way to the rim beside Homer. "If we'd blasted down on the herd the way we usually do, we'd have leastwise got ten of the critters, but yo're so damn knowin' in yore ways of late."

"I did wait too long," Homer admitted sourly. "Couldn't he p it. That fight oughta lasted a heap longer. It was the fastest thing I ever saw. I got so interested in it I couldn't take my eyes off of it. I thought the jack would hold it for at least ten minutes. He just never met 'imself a Paint Lands wild hoss before. We'll send in the skinners to rip off an' bring out the hides. Now come on. Back to the hosses an' on down to the wagons. We'll take the short cut an' head the herd between them big buttes to the east. The Indians are right now doin' their part, but I'll bet the ride they're makin' ain't nothin' short of merry hell."

Blue Danger was going on. A mile up the canyon he saw a man mounted bareback on a pony suddenly appear from the mouth of a little gorge. The stallion started to swing farther to the left. Another mounted man appeared in that direction, riding bareback like the first man and seemingly taking shape from the blank wall of the canyon.

Blue Danger whistled his hatred

for the men. He knew what was happening now. These two Indians would push the herd without mercy, never allowing it to slow down. By the time their ponies were spent others would take their place. It was an old, old game to him. It had been old to Silver Devil. Men had pushed him like this before. Always in the past he had managed to take the herd through, and he would do it this time or die in the attempt.

Why the Indians did not open fire on him was a mystery. Men riding like those on the ponies usually opened fire, but the Indians had no guns. They were riding near-naked, having cast away everything of weight. Occasionally they howled like wolves and lifted up light rags to wave them.

Something had to be done. The memory of another chase like this flashed through Blue Danger's hot brain. His eyes swept the canyon rims. If he kept straight on, nothing could keep the mares and the colts from tiring themselves out. That would place the entire herd at the mercy of men.

Instinctively, something told him that men would be waiting with guns for the mares and colts. When they were too exhausted to go on, they would be herded up some canyon with a blank wall at the head of it to bar all escape. Then the men could take their own time about shooting down the mares and colts.

Suddenly Blue Danger swerved to the right and started to head straight eastward across the canyon. It was wild, terrible country up there above him, but it was the only place that would take them to the canyon rim. Only the most desperate wild stallion would have tackled what he was tackling now. He whistled to the

herd, and then started straight for the Indian.

The man ahead was gallant enough about it. He turned his pony straight toward the charging herd. Blue Danger's eyes blazed. This was going to be a fight with a two-legged thing—the most deadly enemy a horse could fight. But he swept on, his bared teeth glinting.

NOW the second Indian was trying to help the first one. He was swinging eastward and yelling. The only thing he did help were the mares and colts. His yelling and rag-waving drove them on at Blue Danger's heels, and Blue Danger was still heading straight into the Indian riding toward him.

At the last moment the Indian tried to swing out of the way, but failed. Blue Danger struck the pony hard in the ribs, and with a bawl of terror the pony went down. The Indian rolled to one side, trying to get out of the way in the boiling dust.

Blue Danger kept on, though he might just as well have turned aside and killed the man. But he was no killer until he had to kill. He whistled, and when he reached the eastern side of the canyon he whirled back, herding the mares and colts up a steep incline.

Now the second Indian was getting close. He was just as courageous as his companion, but he did not face a wild stallion now that was trying to simply get across a canyon. He was facing a fighting stallion rear-guarding his herd, and suddenly Blue Danger was charging him with his whistling filling the air and scaring the pony out of its wits.

Nothing could have held the pony in the face of that charge even if the Indian had wanted the pony held. A man with his bare hands

could not face such a wild-eyed horse so suddenly turning to an attacking monster. The man whirled his pony away, his rag waving, and started dashing back across the canyon and past his companion who now lay in a groaning, writhing wad on the ground where the main herd had struck him down, leaving him with his eyes filled with dust and his face covered with blood.

Suddenly Blue Danger was swinging back. He tore on until he reached the foot of the slope. There he whirled again, a rearing, snorting and whistling thing, pawing the air and threatening the man on the pony until the last mare and colt had gone up the slope and were out of danger. Then he turned and followed the herd, the loose shale slipping and rattling under his feet.

When he reached the canyon rim it looked as if the getaway had been made and there would be little more to worry about. He did not realize that he was but shortening the distance between him and the armed men Butch Homer had left on guard. That danger did not present itself for nearly an hour. He kept on, quieting the herd and bringing it down to a more reasonable pace. He took it over a great mountain hump and started winding down toward the rougher country where slopes and rock slides loomed at every hand.

He stopped at the head of the herd on a shaggy crag. For all of five minutes he stood there, undecided whether to turn northward again or to keep on and then swing southward toward two towering red buttes. A faint, faraway yelling that seemed to come from northward and behind decided him.

It looked as if he had made the right move thirty minutes later. He had wound the herd on down the

dangerous slopes, at times taking them along brittle ledges where man-ridden horses would have turned back. Deep below the crag he was in another wide valley when he looked back and saw a figure on a pony trying to urge his mount down the steep slope.

Then he saw two near-naked bare-back riders up the valley. He did not know that they were other Indians who had picked up the trail and were merely there to urge him and the herd along the rest of the way over the original route laid out by the hide hunters.

Now he was going blindly into a second trap of the morning. The riders to northward kept their distance of about a mile away, and the one behind was gradually coming on down. This man had dismounted and was leading his pony. Then two others were appearing up there with their ponies fighting and rearing to keep from being driven down the dangerous way.

Not until he was near the east side of the big valley were Blue Danger's suspicions roused. He threw up his head and whistled a call of danger back over the herd. It was his first outburst since leaving the canyon rim, now far behind them, but it was enough to put the herd on guard. The colts flocked closer to their mothers, and the mares lifted their heads and glanced down the valley at the cause of a new alarm making itself known.

It was another near-naked rider on a shaggy gray pony. This Indian did not come darting his pony forward. He was very quiet, merely showing himself from behind a dense fringe of low trees as if he wanted to be very careful not to disturb some prearranged plan of attack.

Soon another man on a pony appeared a half mile away to north-

ward. Like the other, this Indian simply rode quietly out from behind a great pile of rocks. He even pulled his pony to a halt, and in glancing up the valley beyond the man Blue Danger saw that the two riders a mile away seemed to be holding their ponies down to a slower gait.

Menace tingled at every hand now. It was in Blue Danger's quivering nostrils. He could sense it emanating from every animal in the herd, from the oldest to the youngest. He had the sudden urge to turn back. The men coming down the steep slope in the distance changed the urge. There was nothing to do now but to go on. There was too much danger here, to southward, northward, and back to the west.

LIKE a beaten general with a tired army behind him, Blue Danger started up the slope of the valley. It was dangerous even here. It was too much like going up a narrow trail carved through tall rocks and floored with shale that slipped underfoot and threatened to throw a horse off his feet at every step.

Once started up the slope, once the last of the herd was in the narrow trail, there was no way of leaving it, and now the men behind were pushing their ponies into a gallop. Soon Blue Danger could hear the men yelling. He looked back and saw the rags waving, and again that terrible feeling swept over him, telling him that he was doing the very thing he should not have done.

In a short time the foot of the slope was being blocked by the men on the ponies, and there was nothing Blue Danger could do about it. He could only go on, feeling the trusting eyes of the herd upon him, and at the top of the slope the wind

struck him like a furious hoof stroke on the head.

There was no way to turn back. Blue Danger stopped. He looked back and sent a warning whistle resounding over the herd. It was the *look alive, get ready to run* signal. He stamped his feet, he snorted. There was nothing to do but go on, right into the wind with that smell of danger growing stronger at every step.

He started on, going down another slope. Ahead of him the country was fiercely broken. Underfoot the shale slipped, rattled, and growled. He paused twice, the herd damming up behind him, and halfway down the slope he stopped and whirled back right when he came to the best part of the trail, at a point where it switched to the right and became smooth underfoot. Down that trail would be a long canyon. Once into it the herd could run for an hour, but the canyon would narrow away near the end, and at the end there would be only a smooth wall of rock.

That would be the trap. The thing now was to swing northward quickly. But in that direction lay another great menace. The way was narrow. A rock slide loomed not forty rods away. Blue Danger had never dared to take the herd in this direction, though the country beyond it was open and filled with canyons where escape would be certain. But suddenly the question was decided for him.

A fat man with a matted beard suddenly galloped a big bay around a bend on the trail to northward. The man gave a yell, and the crash of a six-shooter split the air. Any other horse would have run away from the man, but the thought of that blind canyon loomed, and sud-

denly Blue Danger was whirling straight toward the man.

It looked like certain suicide! The rock slide was just beyond the man, and now Blue Danger was upon the man. The six-shooter blazed right in his face, and the man and his horse were knocked off the trail and sent rolling down the slope—with the herd suddenly following Blue Danger.

Suddenly men converged, firing six-shooters, waving their hats and yelling. Blue Danger swept on, the herd pounding and snorting at his heels. A rope bit through the air from somewhere. Blue Danger felt it rake down his back and fall harmlessly on the shale, but it was like lightning to his raw nerves. He whistled to the herd, and men yelled with sudden terror even as he whistled.

The rock slide had started to

move, to growl, to grate, and grind. Suddenly it was moving, the shale spilling forward. A colt bawled in terror at the rear of the herd. A mare bawled back to the colt. Dust swallowed everything after that, everything but the roar of the mountain moving, of men being swept down the slope.

But Blue Danger was going through. What was left of the herd was going through with him. He came out of the dust, the herd streaming behind him, and men still yelling and screeching on the slope behind him.

Ahead the air turned sweet and pure. Blue Danger and his herd were past the danger zone now, though the mountainside back there was still spilling down shale, tons and tons of rock sliding and blocking the way forever to the men who had so carefully laid their trap.

THE END.



COWBOY MUSIC

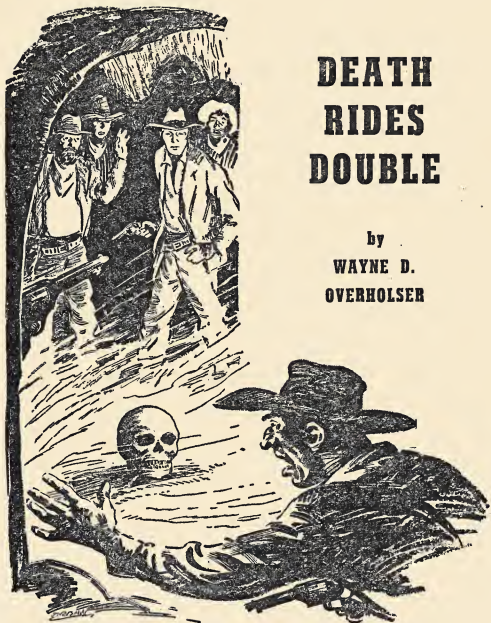
LIKE all outdoor men, the cowboy responds to the beauty of nature in his songs. This is the inevitable result of long, lonely hours when the only expression left to him besides talking to his horse or dog—if he has a dog—is singing.

Like the freighter, packer or wood hauler, he often voices his thoughts audibly. He talks to his animals just as if they understood every word spoken, and undoubtedly they do come to react to the tones of his voice, if not to his actual words. But it is in the evening, when the campfire burns brightly, that he silences the loneliness with songs, and they are as likely to be snatches of Negro spirituals or Irish melodies he has overheard, as to be the rollicking, catchy tunes that are generally associated with him in his relaxation in town after pay day.

A small harmonica that can be carried in the pocket of his shirt is played for hours on end, and though a range man seldom learns to read music, his playing has time, rhythm, and a strange, wild appeal that is far from unpleasant to the trained ear.

DEATH RIDES DOUBLE

by
**WAYNE D.
OVERHOLSER**



RANGER BOB ROYAL held his big hands out to the fire, glancing sideways at the face of his partner, young Mark Webb. Then he turned his back to the flames and stared into the thick blackness that lay beyond the mouth of the cave. A flash of lightning shed a temporary

light upon the earth and fled. Thunder rolled its hollow boom across the darkened sky. Royal moved around the fire as a sudden gust of wind threw a splatter of rain where he stood.

"Still pouring," he said casually. "Let her rain. We're dry, fed, and

sleepy. What else could a man ask?"

"Yeah, we'd better be comfortable," Webb muttered, "on account of tomorrow night we may be roasting in hell together."

Royal turned so that he faced the fire again.

"What's the matter, kid?" he asked with a grin. "Kind o' nervous?"

"Me? Nervous? Hell, no," Webb snorted. "I'm just looking the bear in the face and wondering what happened to Matson and Turner. Likewise what we're gonna find when we ride into Red Point."

Smoke drifted into Royal's eyes and he moved again. He didn't blame the kid for being jittery. He'd be all right when it came time to start pitching lead.

"We won't find Matson and Turner alive," he said, his black eyes turning somber. These men had been his friends. Matson had been sent into Red Point in the spring and had never returned. Then Turner had gone a month ago, and he also had not come back. Now Webb and he, Royal, were going in together, and the same fate might well lay ahead for them.

"I hope I settle up for Matson and Turner before they salivate me." Webb started to build a smoke. Several brown grains dropped from his slightly unsteady fingers before he got the paper rounded up.

"This is new country to you, Mark"—Royal sat down beside the younger man—"but not to me. Matson and I chased that Mex killer, Juan Chirvez, through here three years ago. On our way back we stayed in this same cave."

He picked up a stick and drew a map in the sand.

"We're twenty miles from Red

Point. It's another twenty to the border, and all desert. Cattle could be driven through in spring when there's a few waterholes, but not now. When we get to the rimrock"—he traced the edge of the valley on the map—"I'll go on alone. They know me and they don't you. We'll stay at the hotel, and we'll get together after we have a look-see. Better stick around Tohl's place when I'm in there. It's a good spot for trouble."

ROYAL sat back and filled his pipe thoughtfully. "Funny thing about Red Point. It's Sam Tohl's town. He practically owns it. He's the mayor and the council and he even picks the county sheriff. There's two or three big ranches in the foothills north of town, and some little gold mines scattered around. The town's the hang-out for all the riffraff of the border. Personally I wouldn't trust Tohl as far as I could sling a longhorn by the tail, but he's always kept the toughs under control, and headquarters has let him pretty much alone. I don't know how to account for this flurry of cattle rustling and stage holdups unless Tohl figures on making a clean-up and pulling out."

"They say he's pretty good with his Colts," Webb said and got up.

"He's a killer, all right." Royal agreed grimly.

Webb was walking restlessly away from the lighted area and around a twist in the cave. Suddenly Royal heard him give a yell, an eerie, hair-lifting screech that might have come from some weird monster of another world.

"What the hell!" Royal muttered, a strange tingling along the back of his neck. Then he was forced to laugh as he saw Webb dart around the bend in the rock wall and come

toward him. The young ranger was white-faced and shaking.

"Was that me," Webb asked, "or the damned ghost I found back there?"

"That was you, all right," Royal grinned. "There's a crack in the rock back there and it comes out here." He nodded across the fire. "It must go a devil of a long ways because it sure gives an unearthly disguise to a human voice. Matson and I discovered it the other time we were here. What did you find?"

Webb went back and returned, rolling a round object along with his foot. Hardened as Royal was to horrible sights, he gasped as he looked into the grinning face of a human skull.

"See if you can find the rest of the skeleton, Mark," said Royal, picking up the skull.

Two things Royal saw as he examined it. The first was a bullet hole square in the top of the head, so exact that it might well have been measured. The second was a gold tooth set in the front of the lower jaw.

"There's some bones scattered around," Webb called to him.

Royal picked up a blazing pine limb and searched the side of the cave around the bend. He found bits of cloth and leather and the fragments of two gun belts. The two rangers went back to the fire, and there was a grim set to Royal's thin lips that boded no good for the mysterious forces that had turned Red Point into an outlaw town. It was a long time before he spoke.

"Mark," he said finally, "if I read the sign right, we've found all that's left of our friend Matson. He had a gold tooth like that, and he packed two fancy silver-plated guns that the killers must have taken. If they'd been ordinary guns, they'd have

been left. Looks like the killers bushwhacked Matson. Then when he was lying there helpless, they let him have it in the top of the head. Nobody'd get a slug like that in a fight."

"Maybe it'd be a good idea if only one of us slept at a time," Webb suggested softly.

Royal nodded. "They probably got Matson on the way home after he'd learned some things they didn't want to get out. I don't think we'll be bothered tonight, but we'll play safe. Tomorrow when you ride into Red Point, keep your badge in your pocket."

"That's a good idea, too," Webb said. "You can roll in. I'll take the first watch."

Nothing happened during the night, and by morning the storm had passed. They mounted and were on their way by the time the sun had risen over the east rim of the canyon. It was afternoon when they reached the rimrock and looked down upon the desert floor. Red Point lay below, hazy and indistinct through the heat waves.

"Here we are," said Royal, "looking at the devil's own town. All we got to do now is to find out who that devil is."

"We'll blast him out and burn his tail with some lead," Webb grinned.

Royal looked at his partner keenly. This was the boy's first big job. The jitters of the night before had gone. He had come through all right.

"Remember, when you see me in town, you don't know me. And don't start any trouble. So long." Royal kned his long-legged roan down the slope. He turned once to see Webb astride his bronc like a statue against the sky, waved, and went on.

RED POINT was just as Royal remembered it. Unpainted false fronts lifted to the sky, accentuating the unkempt shabbiness that was characteristic of the town. The ranger's eyes swept the wide, rutted street, finding it almost deserted at this hour. He tied his roan at the hitch rack in front of Tohl's place. Across the dust strip in a Mexican dive two fast gunshots ripped apart the hot silence, then quiet settled down again. Royal swore under his breath and stepped up to the sidewalk. If he had his way, he'd burn down this town and chase every tough that it held back across the border.

Just as Royal reached the door, the bat wings burst open and a hard-faced hombre barred his path. Recognition colored his muddy eyes as he saw Royal. He stood for a second, taking in the ranger's lean-muscled figure, the long-barreled Colts that rode low in worn leather holsters, and last of all the deep, black eyes.

"Ranger," he spat the word as if it were an insult, "we ain't needing you here."

Royal knew the man as Spade Dorgan, one of Tohl's gun hands. Red Point was the only town north of the border where such a notorious renegade could have kept out of jail.

"When you talk to the law, you use better manners," Royal said. "Maybe I came down here to teach you some of the same."

Dorgan started a string of oaths that was suddenly cut short as Royal's right fist licked out in a lightning blow, caught him on the point of the chin and sent him sprawling across the saloon porch. Dorgan jerked his gun free and let it drop as the ranger's Colt roared. He gazed stupidly at the red slash

across the back of his gun hand.

"Get up," Royal barked, "and start moving!" He fanned the man's boot heel with another bullet, grinning as he saw Dorgan make the corner of the building in three jumps and disappear.

Royal replaced his gun and shook his head. He'd told Webb to stay out of trouble, and hell, here he himself was in it the minute he hit town. But this was the only way to deal with outlaws like Dorgan, and Red Point was full of just such gents.

He went into the saloon and strode to the bar.

"Howdy, fat," he said to the barkeep. "I'll take whiskey."

The man glowered and shoved him his drink.

Royal gulped the whiskey, paid for it, and asked, "Where's Tohl?"

The apron nodded to the background. Royal threaded his way through the deserted tables, knocked on the door, and entered when a voice said, "Come in."

Sam Tohl was seated at a table, a bottle in front of him. He was a tall, slender man with abnormally long arms. His fingers, spread on the table before him, looked almost clawlike. He wore the traditional gambler garb, black coat, ruffled white shirt, and black string tie.

For a second he stared in surprise at Royal. Then he jumped up and extended a long-fingered hand.

"Bob Royal!" he bellowed. "By damn, for once I'm glad to see a ranger!"

Royal shook hands, but he kept the surprise he felt from showing on his face. He saw that Tohl, as usual, wore his pearl-handled guns tilted for the lightning draw that made him famous.

"That's funny, Sam," Royal grinned. "I always kind o' had the

feeling you didn't care for ranger company."

"Sit down." Tohl motioned to a chair and sank back into his own seat. He got another glass and poured drinks, some of the liquor spilling on the table top. Then he looked at Royal, and the ranger saw a tenseness on the man's face he'd never seen before. "Things are different here in Red Point than they used to be. I think I'm gonna enjoy having you around for a few days."

Royal busied himself filling his pipe. He didn't speak for a time as he turned this unexpected reception over in his mind. Tohl had always resented any ranger interference in Red Point affairs. Claimed he could handle the law in his own town.

"I guess you know why I'm here?" Royal said finally.

Tohl nodded. "That's why I'm glad to see you. Red Point's finally got away from me. I ain't had anything to do with this stage robbing and cattle rustling you been hearing about, and I can't stop it."

Royal wondered if the strain on the man's face was feigned.

"Who is back of it then?" he asked.

The town boss shrugged. "I don't know, but about a year ago Notch Bescos drifted into town."

ROYAL lifted his eyebrows. "Bescos? I thought he'd been killed below the border three years ago."

"That's what I heard, but he's been in Red Point off and on for a year. He'll be in tonight. You can see for yourself."

Royal leaned forward. "Maybe you know what happened to Dick Matson and Stan Turner."

"A couple of my boys found Tur-

ner, or what was left of him," Tohl explained readily. "The body was lying off the trail just beyond the rimrock. Matson rode off. That's the last I heard of him."

"They must have learned considerable."

"I don't know, but I didn't have anything to do with what happened to 'em. You got to believe me, Royal. It ain't my way to fight rangers."

Tohl leaned forward, his talonlike fingers clenched into a tight fist. The worried lines deepened around his eyes.

"Just how'd you lose control?" Royal asked skeptically.

The town boss got up and paced the length of the room. He stared out of the window into the rubbish-cluttered alley. Finally he turned.

"For ten years I've run this town, depending on these." He slapped his pearl-butted guns. "But maybe somewhere along the line I lost my guts. My men listen to me, but take orders from Bescos, and I'm afraid to tackle him. He's lightning and he's poison. If you're thinking of taking him north, you're just getting yourself ready to slide in alongside Stan Turner."

Royal knocked the dottle out of his pipe and stood up.

"I'll think that over, Tohl," he said. "Reckon I'll see you again."

He went out, feeling Tohl's green eyes follow him. Back on the sidewalk, he breathed deeply, but the air didn't seem clean. There was a stench of evil about this town, and Sam Tohl was the crux of it. Convincing as the man's act had been, Royal was certain he was lying. Bescos had been a legendary figure for years along the border, wanted for a dozen crimes. A heartless killer, as fast as Tohl had said, but there had been a fairly authentic

report that he'd been killed in a fight with the *Rurales*.

Royal rode to the public stable and turned his roan over to the liveryman. Whatever else happened, he'd sure find out about Bescos before he went back to headquarters. He got a room in the hotel, washed and shaved, and felt like a new man. That the shadow of a boothill grave was upon him, he well knew. Matson and Turner hadn't come back, and Tohl would regard him as more dangerous than either of them, but he would be careful. The death of another ranger would bring the whole force into Red Point. Whatever Tohl's scheme was, it would have to look good.

Royal left the hotel and crossed the street to a restaurant. By the time he'd finished, desert dusk had settled down and hid the squalor of the border town. It was now that Red Point bloomed. The sidewalks were filled with jostling, trouble-seeking men, cowpunchers, miners, bearded prospectors, and hard-faced hombres who found the climate of Red Point ideal for their lawless business.

Royal stepped casually into Tohl's place again and ordered a drink. He noticed Mark Webb playing poker at one of the back tables. Webb looked up, saw him, and went on playing, his face expressionless. Dorgan was playing at the table next to Webb's. Beside the gunman sat a wiry-built man, swarthy-skinned, with a tight-lipped, cruel mouth. Dorgan said something to him, and he shot a swift look at Royal. Then he turned his head, and the ranger saw that his right ear was missing. It was Bescos all right! He tallied perfectly with the description Royal had read.

THE outlaw got up and came toward Royal, pushing men out of his way with slow insolence. When he reached the bar he stopped, and for a long minute let his eyes play over Royal's face. A cold blue, the eyes were those of a man who kills and enjoys it. The ranger met his look with a stare just as icy. One of them would not walk out of Tohl's place.

Then Bescos spoke, and his words licked out like a hungry flame, "I hear you aim to take me north. Hombre, I ain't going, and neither are you. Rangers are my meat!"

"Maybe killers are my meat, Bescos," Royal said softly. "You'll either go north with me, or stay here in boothill. Drop your gun belt, then git your hands up!"

Bescos didn't speak again. He was balancing easily on his feet, and Royal saw that he was going to draw. It showed in the twitch of the corners of his mouth. Then both hands drove for the black butts of his guns.

Royal's right hand sliced downward, plucked his gun, and came up. The hammer dropped just once, and Bescos was driven back on his heels. his Colts still pointed floorward. Death-twitching fingers pressed triggers, and slugs churned into the floor. For a second the outlaw tottered, then slid down against the bar, and rolled over on his side, blood frothing his lips.

It was then that Royal pulled his other gun and faced the crowded room.

"You sitting pat, gents," he inquired, "or does somebody else crave another deal?"

Nobody answered. A strange, unbelieving look was upon the faces of these men. Royal read their minds as plainly as if their thoughts were printed on the pages of a book.

In their eyes Notch Bescos had been invincible. Yet he had gone down before a lawman's gun.

"Then I reckon Red Point is a considerable better town than when I rode in," Royal commented. He backed through the door. He saw Mark Webb sit back limply in his seat, his face white. There was no other motion in the room. The blue gun smoke still hovered above the bar, moving slightly as a stray current of air struck it.

Then Royal was on the sidewalk, the bat wings slapping shut. He turned and walked rapidly to the hotel, climbed the stairs and went to his room.

He sat down on the bed, thinking about his talk with Tohl, and how Bescos had jumped him the minute he'd entered the room. Tohl hadn't been anywhere in sight. The whole thing rang false. It wasn't like the town boss to go yellow because some gun-slinger with a name rode into town.

Royal thought he had the answer. It would be hard for Tohl to explain another ranger disappearing in his territory, but a killing in his saloon with a gent like Bescos on the giving end would seem natural. Royal had gummed things up for the town boss by beating Bescos to the draw. The smart thing for him and Webb to do would be to hightail to headquarters and come back in force, but that wasn't Bob Royal's way.

There was a knock on the door. Royal whirled, palming a gun. "Come in," he called.

The door opened and Mark Webb stood there. Royal relaxed and holstered his gun.

"Saw your room number on the register," Webb said, and shut the door. He sat down, his face still white. "Bob, I never saw anything

like it, the way you faced that damned killer. I wouldn't have given a plugged peso for your chances."

"You just never saw a ranger go into action in a spot like that, kid," Royal grinned. "Some of these days, after a little more education, you'll be standing in my shoes. What'd you learn?"

"Not much," Webb said, frowning. "I'd been in there 'bout half an hour before you showed up. I didn't see anybody I spotted as Tohl."

ROYAL got out his pipe and stuffed the bowl. Briefly he told Webb what Tohl had said. "I've got an idea," he added, "that that was all a bunch of hogwash, but I'd like to trap Tohl with his fingers really in something. Did you see anything of a red-bearded squat gent with old clothes on that looked like he'd been rolling in clay?"

"Yeah," Webb nodded. "He's been paying for his drinks with gold dust."

"That's Grizzly Pete. He hates Tohl worse'n a sidewinder. Go get him, and don't let anybody know what you're doing."

"You bet." Webb went out on a run.

In half an hour he was back. "He's coming. I had to run a sandy on him to get him outside."

Presently Grizzly Pete came in, his bright little eyes twinkling under brows as red as his fiery beard. He walked up to Royal and extended a calloused hand.

"Good gunning, ranger," he grinned. "Now if you'd jest git your sights lined up on that damned, no-good Tohl, I'd say you'd just about finished your job here."

"I can't do that, Pete, until I get

Tohl with his fingers into something." Royal motioned to a chair. "Sit down and let's parley. I've got an idea that if we set a trap and bait it with gold dust, Tohl will step into it. That is, if you're willing to help."

"Me help? Say, I'd even git a job nursing beef if it'd put Tohl where he belongs."

"That's the stuff! Now I want you to go back to Tohl's, and start talking about the big strike you made. Spread it around that you're drifting north tonight with your poke full of gold dust."

"I did that already, Bob. I reckon I had a drink or so too many, and I kind o' bragged. I ain't telling no lie when I say I sure as hell did make a strike. Found a pocket. I got enough dust on me right now to make Tohl's eyes pop out, and I told Clint Massey that I was riding north tonight. Told him I didn't trust Tohl none."

Royal's eyes glistened. It couldn't have been better. Clint Massey was the sheriff and Tohl's puppet.

"That's great! Now here's my plan."

When Royal had finished, Pete nodded. "It ought to work, Bob. Tohl won't turn down a chance to get some dust and salivate you at the same time."

"Don't worry about me. You're the bait, Pete, and when you trap wolves the bait is liable to get chewed up considerable."

"I'd take a little chewing just to get the deadwood on Tohl," the prospector grinned.

"Now get moving. Sneak out of town without being seen."

When they had gone, Royal sat for a time smoking his pipe. He'd said Pete was the bait, but he knew that he, Bob Royal, was the real

lure. Tohl wouldn't be averse to making a little profit, but his main interest would be in getting rid of another ranger under circumstances that wouldn't point to him. Then Royal shrugged, put out his pipe, and got up. Death would be side-riding him tonight, but that was all part of his job of being a ranger. He gathered up his kit and went down the stairs.

"Guess I won't be sleeping here tonight," he said to the clerk, and paid his bill.

Outside, he saw that there was a thin slice of moon in the east, enough to make riding easier. He got his roan, racked him in front of Tohl's saloon, and entered. He paused for a second inside the bat wings and took a quick look around. Spade Dorgan was there playing poker, and not far away was Clint Massey. Royal threaded his way through the tables, no sign on his face that he was feeling the impact of hostile eyes. He knocked on the door of the back room and heard Tohl's call to enter.

TOHL smothered a look of surprise with a welcoming smile when he saw who his visitor was, but Royal knew this man, knew that the town boss wasn't pleased at the way the duel with Bescos had ended.

"I thought you'd be on your way, Royal"—Tohl gestured toward a chair—"knowing that Bescos had some friends here in Red Point."

"I would have," Royal admitted as he sat down. "I figured after what you told me this afternoon that with Bescos gone, you'd get things under control again, and this lawlessness would stop, but I saw something awhile ago that told me I had more work to do. Ranger killing is something we don't stand

for, and I know who killed Dick Matson."

"You do?" Tohl lifted an eyebrow and stared speculatively at Royal.

"Yeah. Funny you or Massey didn't see the same thing. I saw Grizzly Pete packing one of Matson's guns. I wouldn't be mistaken about that hogleg. I saw it too often. I figured on coming back after things quieted down and picking Pete up, but he's gone. Thought you might know where he was."

For a moment Tohl didn't answer, but sat stroking his smooth-shaven chin, his eyes not wavering from the ranger's face. Royal surmised what he was thinking. Pete hadn't killed Matson, and Tohl knew it. This was a cock-and-bull story, and Tohl knew that; too, but Royal was counting on Tohl seeing the chance to kill him and get Pete's gold, and the town boss was just confident enough of himself to be certain he could play Royal's game and beat him at it.

"I don't know where Pete is, but maybe I can find out," Tohl declared. "I'll get Massey."

He went out and Royal breathed a sigh of relief. Tohl was going to take the bait, and he'd play the cards himself because it wasn't the man's way to leave anything as important as this to a subordinate. Then Royal smiled ruefully. Maybe he had been too clever for his own good and had bought himself a trail-side death just as Matson and Turner had.

He didn't feel any better when Tohl came back in with Massey, Spade Dorgan, and Massey's deputy, Nick Jarvis, a renegade gunman.

"Pete's gone north," Tohl announced. "He was shooting off his mouth at the bar. But he's only

been gone an hour or so. We'll catch him all right."

"We?" Royal looked surprised. "You don't need to bother, Sam. I can take care of Pete."

"No, we're going." Tohl's voice brooked no argument on that point. "We feel plumb ornery about letting Matson's killer slip away like this."

Royal shrugged and offered no more objections. Dorgan's and Massey's eyes were on him, malicious smiles on their lips. Royal realized, with a sinking of his heart, that this was one time he had stuck his chin out too far. He'd only figured on Tohl and maybe Massey going along, not four of them.

"Our brons are in the stable," Tohl said. "We'll meet you out in front."

Royal went back through the saloon. Jarvis dawdled along behind him, his hand close to his gun butt. This had been made to order, and they weren't taking any chances.

In a few minutes the other three joined them, Massey leading Jarvis' bronc. There was a squeak of saddle leather as Royal and the deputy mounted, then they swung into the street and rode out of town. Tohl had dropped in beside Royal, the rest behind. There was no talk and no sounds except the thud of horses' hoofs and the yapping of distant coyotes. Finally they reached the rimrock and climbed the twisting trail to the top.

"I've been thinking, Sam"—Royal broke the silence—"Pete won't know he's being chased. It's seventy-five miles to Plainville, too far to ride at night. Reckon he'll hole up somewhere, maybe that cave at the foot of Indian Mountain."

"You wouldn't be having any idea, ranger," snarled Dorgan. "You—"

"Shut up, Dorgan!" Tohl ordered. "If we don't catch him before, we'll take a look there."

As the miles dropped behind they lapsed into silence again, silence that was tight and hostile. Royal had been right back there in the hotel when he'd thought that death might be his saddle pard tonight. Dorgan's words had dispelled any doubt that he might be fooling them. They meant to catch him in the trap he had set.

WHEN they reached the point in the trail that lay below the cave, they pulled up. The slim moon had been blotted out by the dark bulk of Indian Mountain. The sky was lighted only by the stars, and seemed to press down and add to the blackness that lay upon the earth.

"Looks like you had the right hunch, ranger," Tohl said as they dismounted. "We'll have a look-see at the cave."

Like five black ghosts they climbed the slope. They saw the gleam of a fire, and Royal felt Tohl lean close.

"He's there; all right."

They darted in, Royal with a gun in his palm. Pete had his back to them.

"Reach!" Royal ordered as they poured in. "You're under arrest, Pete, for the murder of Dick Matson."

Pete whirled, started to leap toward a gun, then stopped as he saw that he was covered. His hands went up. Tohl laughed, a harsh laugh like rocks grating against each other as they pour down a mountain. Then Royal saw that Jarvis had come in behind him, and he felt the cold muzzle of the killer's Colt against his spine.

"Your play's up, ranger," Tohl

rasped. "I don't just savvy your game, but you're done now. We're not as big fools as you figured." Royal heard his gun cock. "If I ever saw a set-up made to order, this is it. We kill you and the old man, and if anybody finds you, it looks like you killed each other, and I can tell 'em why. To top it off, we take the gold for our trouble."

He was bringing his Colt down, Royal saw, and felt his own helplessness. Pete was standing spread-legged in front of the fire. Death was in the cave, and there was nothing Royal could do. A move would put a slug into his back. If Webb wasn't on the job—

"Don't shoot him," a weird voice filled the cave. "You killed me—Dick Matson. Isn't that enough?"

Every man stood transfixed as the eerie sound rolled from the rocks, an awful, soul-shattering sound that seemed to come from no living man. Then there was another sound, a rumbling upon the rock floor of the cave. A human skull rolled toward them and stopped, a gold tooth shining in the firelight.

"Matson!" Dorgan shrieked. "I killed him!"

Royal moved fast. He whirled away from Jarvis, twisted, and let his hammer drop. A stream of flame ribboned the gloom, and the killer went back and down. All hell was loose now, hell and sudden death. Pete had leaped away from the lighted area. Another gun had come into action from the back of the cave. Tohl and his men were shooting, frantic, wild gunfire. Dorgan screamed above the crashing thunder: "It's Matson," and slammed a slug at the figure in the back of the cave.

Royal saw Massey pitch his length on the rock floor. Tohl had emptied one pearl-handled Colt and

was triggering his second one when Royal shot him through the head. Dorgan screamed again like a man eternally damned, started to run, staggered and fell. Then there was silence as the blue-gray smoke of guns hung above the fire and began to eddy away.

Webb came into the firelight, his young face triumphant. "You all right, Bob?"

"Sure, I'm all right." Royal plugged a bullet hole in his shoulder with his bandanna. "How about you, Pete?"

"Sound as a fiddle." The prospector hopped out of the darkness, a rifle in his hand. "This was over before I could find my damned Winchester. She sure worked, Bob, but it kind o' had me worried for a minute there."

Royal leaned against the wall of the cave. He was tired, and his shoulder was aching like blazes.

"You're a ranger now, Mark," he said, "and a damned good one. You were initiated in the toughest town this side of the Rio. And now it isn't tough any more!"

THE END.

FIRES

LONG before anyone thought that there might sometime be a shortage of grass or timber, cattlemen discovered that a grass fire was their greatest enemy. For that reason the custom of stamping out fag ends of cigarettes and pinching the fire out on a match has always been a universal rule of the range, and the rider who neglects it is likely to regret his carelessness.

The long, dry grass catches fire so easily and the flames spread so rapidly that even if the man who tossed his lighted cigarette away escapes, thousands of acres of winter forage may be destroyed in a few hours.

One way of extinguishing a grass fire is to drag a green bullhide along the line. In many instances where there was little or no wind, destructive fires have been stopped in this manner. The hide of a freshly killed animal is heavy and hangs close to the ground, fitting into all the inequalities of the surface. To do this daring feat the rider must have a horse than can be made to run close to, or even into, the fire. He rides so as to pull the hide over the edge of the flames, while his companions follow him and put out the scattered sparks.

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

(yes, I did—actually and literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You too may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 7, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 7, Moscow, Idaho. Adv't. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.



Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

So you don't like the kick of your gun? You want to know how this can be reduced so it will not bother you, and if you can't, you want to obtain another gun which will do the job and kick you less.

As a firearms editor for many years, this complaint about recoil or "kick" is one of the most frequently occurring inquiries we have. The answer to the recoil problem is extremely simple—learn to handle your gun.

Perhaps as a firearms editor I should be sympathetic about the man weighing a hundred and seventy pounds who complains that his 20-gauge shotgun has too much recoil for him to stand and that he has a black-and-blue shoulder and suffers tremendously each time he touches it off. A half dozen shots in one afternoon ruins him.

It is rather difficult to help this particular chap. He wants to know if recoil pads and all those other ac-

cessories on his little 20-gauge might make the gun more comfortable to shoot. Perhaps they would; perhaps not. It's quite likely that the fault lies within himself.

I've gone around to numerous skeet matches, rifle matches, and trap-shooting events. I've watched women weighing less than a hundred pounds shoot two hundred 12-gauge shot shells without a recoil pad and without a padded jacket. I never heard one of them complain. Why is it a hundred-pound woman or a hundred-and-ten-pound man can shoot continuously and absorb recoil without ill effects, whereas some large, heavy men complain that it is too great for them? It's a matter of gun handling.

After I started to write this department on the subject of recoil a

FREE LITERATURE

"Straight Shooting"—16 pages of instructions.....	3c
Western Ammunition Handbook—72 pages.....	5c
Winchester Ammunition Handbook—44 pages.....	3c
Three-pound bundle assorted catalogs—East of Chicago.....	30c
West of Chicago.....	40c

Stamps are accepted. Inclose extra stamp if your letter requires a reply.

very timely letter turned up from Lou Smith, vice president of the Ithaca Gun Co. and an old friend of mine. We had been talking about the same subject, and Lou writes:

"When I was a kid I said to an elderly back-country, fox-hunting farmer: 'A gun always seems to kick me harder when I shoot it at the side of a barn or fence or any other stationary mark, but the same gun and load does not seem to kick me when I fire quickly at running game.'

"That old farmer told me then and there what the reason was. He said the gun really did kick me more when I shot at a stationary object because everybody seemed to think that to prevent recoil one should hold the gun tightly to his shoulder to the end that he would be pulling back on it with both arms, holding it so tight against his shoulder that whenever the backward movement of the gun took place following the recoil, one must push the shoulder back just about the same distance. When shooting at flying or running game, the gun was held loosely, so that it could really move back from the recoil a fraction of an inch before it bedded firmly against the shoulder and before the shoulder started to move back with it.

"He further told me that when getting into action quickly, in a case of that kind, and holding the gun loosely, the arms pushed out rather

than pulled back on the gun, therefore acting as a form of recoil spring. Right or wrong, that is my opinion and I am going to stick to it."

There is really something in this. In other words, it again revolves around the same statement made above that you must learn to handle your gun to avoid the effects of recoil.

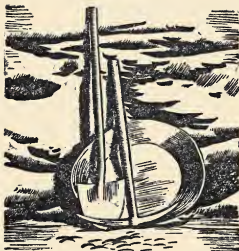
Learn to toss your particular gun to your shoulder with a minimum of effort. Learn to get it in the same position every time. Hold it fairly firmly, but do not clench it tightly and clamp it solidly against the shoulder. Let it recoil. Do not brace yourself against it.

If you check up on the average black-and-blue shoulder created by gun recoil, you'll find that this is not actually on the shoulder, but on the arm, and frequently as low as the muscles of the upper arm. That can mean but one thing, the gun was not on the shoulder properly. Elevating the elbow helps to get that gun into proper position quickly, and when you learn to do it automatically you clear yourself of the problems of recoil.

If you still feel that you have got to reduce recoil, any one of the various forms of recoil pads should help. I get a number of inquiries concerning the "best" recoil pad on the market. There isn't any. They all perform more or less alike.

If you are interested in making a cartridge collection and would like to hear from other collectors, write to this department, inclosing a three-cent stamp for a list of names which will be sent to you as soon as it is compiled. In this way you may be able to trade some of your duplicates with others for something you really need for your collection.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns And Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

WE are going right to headquarters this week for the answer to the important mining queries in Jim K.'s letter from Topeka, Kansas.

"Before I head West prospecting," writes Jim, "there are a lot of things I would like to know about where a man can stake a claim. A long time ago you had a general article on the size of claims, et cetera, which I carefully kept. But how about staking claims in national forest or on homestead land? Or homesteading on mining land? In short, can you supplement that former article with additional data?"

All right, Jim, here goes for your questions, and you're wise to get information on the basic mining laws either before you start or locally as soon as you reach your chosen field.

Local information can be obtained at the office of the mine recorder for the mining district in which you intend to prospect. There are also generally available in the various mining towns and mining centers, maps or blueprint plates kept up to date and showing clearly the claims already staked in a region, their ground position and relation to each other. Such maps are usually well worth their cost of a dollar or a dollar and a half.

As to staking mineral claims in national forests, et cetera, we promised to give you the answer straight from an unimpeachable authoritative source. And we will. The subject is treated on page 21, of United States Bureau of Mines Information Circular No. 6786.

"Placer claims containing alluvial deposits of gold or other metals can be located and patented on the public domain, national forests, *stock-raising* homesteads, and unpatented parts of congressional grants to railroads. Public land temporarily withdrawn from settlement, location, sale, or entry, and reserved for water-power sites, irrigation, classification or other public purpose shall at all times be open to exploration for metalliferous minerals and purchase under the mining laws. However, power or reservoir sites withdrawn by congressional action, or executive order, are *not* subject to mineral location.

"Although placer claims can be located and mineral rights obtained on stock-raising homesteads, written permission must be received from the homesteader to enter on the land, or a bond of a thousand dollars

If you are interested in obtaining a pamphlet on United States mining claims, simply address your request to John A. Thompson in care of this department and inclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope for his answer.

posted to indemnify the agricultural entryman for any damage that might be done to crops or tangible improvements. Surface rights are limited to the land actually needed for mining purposes.

"Mining claims cannot be filed upon patented land except where the minerals have been reserved to the United States, on military or naval reservations, or in national parks, or monuments. Land below high tide, lake beds (except Searles Lake, California), or the beds of navigable rivers are not subject to mineral location.

"Public land in the public-land States, valuable for minerals, cannot be patented except under the provisions of the mining laws, and valid mineral locations take precedence over other forms of land entry.

"According to the Federal law, mining locations, both lode and placer, may be made by citizens or those who have declared their intention to become citizens, by an association of qualified persons, or by a domestic corporation. Locations can be made without regard to age, sex, or residence of the locator. No limit is placed by the Federal statutes on the number of locations that may be made in the United States by an individual or company. A locator may include as co-locators other persons who may or may not have seen the ground. Also, a person may make valid locations for other parties.

"The Federal statutes require that a location notice must contain the

names of the locator, or locators, and a description of the claim by reference to some natural object or permanent monument that will identify the claim. A discovery of valuable mineral within the limits of the claim must be made for the location to be valid."

There you have it, Jim. I imagine that answers most of your questions.

"Suppose I find some workable gold-placer ground," writes F. M. B., of Jacksonville, Florida, who frankly admits he is an absolute novice at prospecting, "where do I start digging?"

Assuming you plan to use a rocker or sluice box, and your claim consists of gravel in a stream or creek bed, start at the lower end and take out your gravel in orderly cuts. Lower end is worked first, so that bedrock can be kept drained and your sluice can be moved back as work progresses against the grade and current of your water flow. Actual location and rotation of the cuts depends a lot on the local topography and conditions. Sometimes work is begun at one edge and a cut taken clear across the width of the pay streak. Or the ground may be worked out by a series of longitudinal cuts.

The important thing is to study the ground first, figure out the best system of cuts for that particular ground, then go ahead on your previously figured-out plan. Don't just dig hit or miss.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.



The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

Do you remember, some time ago we mentioned that the word "dinkum" intrigued us and we'd like some Aussie to enlighten us as to its meaning? Well, Valerie Shepherd, when she sent us the letter you see below, tacked this postscript on it. She says, "The word 'dinkum' is our most popular slang word, but how or where it originated, I couldn't say. I think 'real,' 'true' or 'genuine' are the words which most nearly approach its meaning."

We want to thank you, Valerie, for explaining this to us and from this day forth dinkum is part of our vocabulary. And now, here's her letter:

Dear Miss Rivers:

Here's another "dinkum Aussie" girl writing for Pen Pals from all parts of the world. I am sixteen years old and interested in all sports, especially tennis and cricket. My hobby is writing letters, so if anybody wants to know about Australia just let me hear from you. I shall try to answer all letters.—Valerie Shepherd, 340 Tenshurst Street, Willoughby, New South Wales, Australia

Jack and Bob are way up in the world—

Dear Miss Rivers:

We are two young men stationed as rangers in a lookout tower four thousand feet above sea level in the center of the Olympic Mountain range in the Pacific Northwest. Our work keeps us from contact with the outside world, so we are hoping that through you we may make lots of friends. We have plenty of time to write letters and promise to answer all we receive.—Jack Crichton and Bob Davis, Box 111, Doty, Washington

Calling all pals in their forties—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Would you be good enough to enter my plea in the Hollow Tree for Pen Pals between forty and forty-six years of age from the United States. I am fond of all outdoor life. I will

answer all letters, so here's hoping I get a few pals.—Minnie Whitman, Church Cottage, Stone, Aylesbury Bucks, England

Joe is a poet, and here he shows it—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I'm Joe of El Paso, and five feet nine. I want all the fellows to drop me a line, I'm Irish and weigh one sixty-one, Full of fun and on the run, I'll take you places, tell you things I've done, The ones who write I will not shun. So, come on, fellows, I'll treat you right, Sit down now and write my letter tonight.—Joe O'Neill, 2303 E. Yandell Boulevard, El Paso, Texas

Write to Jean, pals, and redeem yourselves—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I've been reading your letters in the Hollow Tree and have written to many pals, but am sorry to say I've never received any answers, so I'm entering my letter in hopes that someone may see it and write to me. I'm twenty-two years old and have lived in a small town nearly all my life. I promise to exchange snapshots with anyone who sends me one and will answer all letters, so come on and put a few words on paper for me, one and all.—Jean Stacy, Box 215, Dalton, Nebraska

Ronald will trade stamps—

Dear Miss Rivers:

May I join your Hollow Tree? I would like to correspond with everyone, but especially those who live in Alaska or northern Canada. I'm interested in these localities because my doctor recommends them as the only parts of North America where I might enjoy good health. I'm twenty-five years old and have had asthma all my life. My hobby is stamp collecting, and I will trade stamps with anyone living in the United States, Canada, or any other country, and will do my best to help any collector who writes me. I have plenty of time to answer, so come one, come all.—Ronald McCowia, 437 East Martin Street, East Palestine, Ohio

Christine loves the West—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am neither bored nor lonely—life is much too interesting. However, I must confess to being stricken with that deadly malady, home-sickness! I miss the sweep of the prairie, the vast stretch of sky, the flaming sunsets over the Laramie Plains, the sandhills of Nebraska, the wind in the sage—in short, the West. Those of you who know and love the West please write to me.—Christine McCrae, Andover, New Hampshire

Charles wants to hear from country dwellers—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young man twenty-two years of age and stand six feet tall. To have friends write to me from any part of our country has been my wish for a long time. I would especially like to hear from anyone living on a farm or in a rural district because I've lived in New York City all my life and would prefer hearing from those not familiar with city life. My favorite sports are swimming and baseball, and I'm interested in photography and collecting stamps. I promise to answer all letters, so don't forget to write to a lonely young man.—Charles Speck, CCC Company 3217, La Grande, Oregon

Don't keep Angela waiting for some mail—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am seventeen years old, a senior in high school and would like to hear from boys and girls all over the world. My hobbies are collecting snaps and writing letters. I will gladly exchange snaps with all who write and sincerely hope they will make it soon.—Angela Tolarico, 321 New Market Road, Dunellen, New Jersey

Joe's plea is for a lasting friendship—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonesome young man twenty-one years old who is desirous of hearing from Pen Pals around my age from all parts of the globe. My hobbies are drawing and writing letters. I would like to make real friends with those who write to me and am interested in knowing about the places in which they live. If anyone in Cedar Rapids sees this, I wish they'd write too. Here's hoping I receive some interesting letters.—Joe Wagner, Jr., 1331 Sycamore Street, Waterloo, Iowa

This Oklahoma miss has traveled some—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to join your Hollow Tree and receive lots of letters from boys and girls all over the world. I am nineteen years old, have lived on a ranch most all my life and love all outdoor sports. My hobby is collecting movie star photographs, and I would like to exchange them with anyone who would be interested. I have traveled in California, New Mexico, Arizona, Arkansas and Texas, so if anyone wants to know anything about these States I would be glad to answer questions. I promise to answer all letters, so come on, boys and girls, and heed my plea.—Anna Mae Ramsey, c/o G. H. Parch, Rt. No. 1, Duncan, Oklahoma

And here's our first Pen Pal from Malta—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a sixteen-year-old girl and would like to hear from boys and girls from all over the

world. I enjoy writing letters and have oodles of time to devote to it. Besides loving to write, I enjoy good music and I study it, too. I love cycling, hiking and other forms of exercise. I'll exchange snapshots and give you all the information I can about Malta. I'll answer all letters, so come on, all of you, and let's be friends.—Emma Gay, 92 Villa Ambrosia, Villa Ambrosia Street, Hamrun, Malta

These three soldiers are a long way from home—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Being very enthusiastic readers of Western Story, we would like very much to join the Hollow Tree. We are three lonely British soldiers serving in India, and as we do not see many white folks, we would very much like to hear from them. Harry is an Orderly Room Clerk, twenty-three years of age. Roy is a drummer nineteen years old, and Alec is an Armourer twenty-two years old. We will answer all letters and are willing to exchange snapshots, so come on all who would like to hear about India and write to us.—Harry Brown, Roy Russell and Alec Cliefe, "H.Q." Company, 1st Bn., The Wiltshire Regiment, Baird Barracks, Bangalore, South India

Barbara wants to collect Pen Pals as a hobby—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a girl eighteen years old and I would like to have lots of Pen Pals. I love all sports, especially swimming, boating and roller skating. I have no special hobby at present, but would like to make collecting Pen Pals my hobby in the future. I'll exchange snapshots.—Barbara Baylis, 47 Roosevelt Street, Inwood, Long Island, New York

Dorris is an athlete—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Five foot two with eyes of blue, that's me! I play on a girls' softball team and roller skate in my spare time, so come on, all you ball enthusiasts, and write to a lonely bench-warmer. I promise to answer all letters p. d. q. and exchange snapshots.—Dorris Rider, 915 Chico Avenue, Pomona, California

Clarence expects a whole barrel of mail—

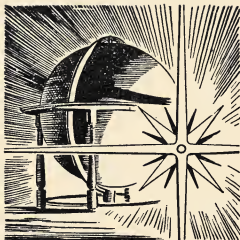
Dear Miss Rivers:

I am free, white and twenty-one and have traveled in all of the States east of the Mississippi. Now that I am home, I find it very dull and lonesome, and I would like to hear from Pen Pals from everywhere. I'll answer everyone and be "tickled pink" to swap snaps, stamps, or what have you. I'm carrying a barrel down to the Post Office, so come on everyone, fill 'er up!—Clarence Clough, Box 108, East Calais, Vermont

Everyone write to Norma—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I'm a young girl seventeen years old and my hobbies are writing and art. I'd like to hear from people from all over the world, so come on, boys and girls my age or older, I'll be waiting to hear from you and exchange snaps.—Norma Anderson, 784 Gordon Avenue, Verdun City, Quebec, Canada



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

MANY of the letters which come to this department ask where a young family man with very little money can get a good start on the land without burdening himself with a big mortgage which it will take years of toil to pay.

And in answer to them I recommend that they investigate thoroughly the section discussed today. For it offers just what so many have been looking for; cheap land which can be made to pay unusually well for the man who will treat it right and make it do its best work for him.

This district is that farmland which lies in south Georgia and Alabama. Farms can be bought here

for very little per acre, which are capable of making a greater return per acre, according to government statistics, than most of the high-priced land in sections where the growing season is much shorter.

This section has a growing season of 245 to 270 days. Summers are long but not hot, and the nights are cool, which is important.

They have more than four feet of rainfall per year, over half of it falling during the growing months, and the water supply is excellent.

This region extends from Savannah south along the Georgia coast and westward through Macon, Albany, Ocilla, and Montgomery. The territory generally is highly productive, and with the proper system of crop rotation and by employing leguminous cover crops, the land may be made richer and more fertile year after year.

Before the boll weevil taught Southerners crop rotation, cotton was the main cash crop here, and it still can be grown profitably; but now the successful farmers have learned to diversify. They grow a well-rounded balance of general farm crops and feed hogs, cattle and poultry, for the production of which this section is peculiarly adapted. It has many advantages which enable the growers to produce milk, pork, chickens and eggs at lower cost than elsewhere. There are three reasons why this is a better country from a profit standpoint. They are: low cost of productive land; value of products produced per acre; and, most important, the fact that two or three crops may be raised on every acre every year. The last item means that a

For further information about the region described in this week's department, write John North, inclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope, and he will have literature mailed to you giving full particulars.

patch of ground will do the work of one twice its size and cost farther north.

In getting two crops or more a year off the ground, the usual procedure is to plant small grain for feed in the fall and harvest it in the spring, following that with a planting of corn or hay crops which can either be gathered or harvested by feeding your livestock on it. Winter cover crops of vetch, rye, oats, et cetera, can be utilized as pastureage for livestock.

The wide range of feed and forage produced successfully make it possible for the farmer to have an abundance of home-grown feedstuff the year round. On high-priced land, where it would be unprofitable to use the land for feed, the difference in the cost of stock feed alone often spells the difference between profit and loss on the year's work.

Here the principal forage crops are peanuts, soybeans, which have an added commercial value, velvet beans and cow peas. Usually they are planted with corn, and then the hogs and cattle are turned into the field and allowed to do the work of gathering their own balanced rations.

An important problem to all northern farms is the feed during the winter, when the stock can't get roughage off the ground because of snow and lack of growth. That problem doesn't exist down in this section, for pastureage can be had practically every month in the year. Special crops of rye, oats, clover and wheat are planted for this, while

spring grasses of half a dozen varieties furnish an abundance of grazing.

The actual demand for dairy products down in this country is greater than the farmers can supply, which is an important item, since the market is a farmer's most important consideration. There is a good demand for pure-bred and high-grade dairy cows, too.

For sure-fire return, profitable hog production is one of the farmer's best bets, and down here he has an edge on other parts of the country. With the year-round pasture and two or three crops a year of feed from the same land, the feed-producing value of this land is doubled or tripled, and because of the earliness of feed and forage crops, hogs may be made ready for the market in summer and fall, when prices are high.

According to my mail, poultry raising interests many people who are retiring from the city or are in ill health and can't do heavy labor. Down in this country the chicken business is highly profitable. Under the system of farming practiced down here, the chicken is one of the most important sources of farm income. By taking advantage of the mild climatic conditions prevailing, spring broilers can be produced for market in March and April, the season during which the highest prices are obtained.

All in all, the man with little money can certainly make what little he has go farther in this mild, inexpensive southern location.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.



PART FIVE

IRON MALEMUTE

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

The Story So Far:

Cal Jessup is in charge of the construction of a railroad in Alaska, a difficult feat of engineering because of the ice-covered terrain and freezing temperatures. As the work gets under way, Cal has much trouble with Tuck Gorst who does everything in his power to prevent completion of the railroad on schedule in the hope that he himself will be able to step in and take over when Cal fails.

Most of Gorst's schemes fall through, but he is confident he has Cal stopped when he has his men lay tracks at Windy Gap, which gives him the right of way and blocks Cal at a strategic point. However, Cal goes ahead with his own track laying through the Gap. When Gorst attempts to have him arrested for trespassing, Cal has his men dig away the snowdrifts and shows several lengths of track which he had laid before the first snowfall and which gives him the right of way.

Even this defeat is not enough to discourage Gorst, however. He pulls his trump card by producing an old sourdough who claims he has found gold on nearby Ruby River. The gold fever spreads rapidly and soon Cal is left practically without a crew as the deadline for the completion of the railroad approaches.

CHAPTER XIX

GHOST MAN

CAL JESSUP had been through several gold stampedes. He knew exactly what to expect when Sluice-box Charley told of his discovery on Ruby River and produced his gold specimens. Gorst's men had planted a map of the region on the old prospector and a glimpse of the map was all that was needed for the excited audience.

Cal pushed his way through the mobs around the outfitting stores, selected men he knew had influence over their fellows, and tried to pound sense into their heads. "I know the Ruby Creek country," he said. "I've prospected there, and there may be pockets, but there are no large values. You boys will just waste your time and money."

"The hell with you, Jessup," a Gorst man bellowed. "All you care about is gettin' the boys to stay and build your railroad."

Cal had to fight back the impulse to exchange a few punches with the fellow. There were too many important things to be done. After several hours' of persuasive talking he managed to whip most of his straw bosses into line. But he might as well have tried to stem the ice going out of the Yukon as to have attempted to reason with the others.

When the stores were cleaned out of grub and equipment, the rush from town ended. Men couldn't fight mosquitoes, streams, and brush without food. There was nothing for them to do but stay on the job. Much of the pay roll that Cal had expected would go to the Blue Moon, from which place it would be returned to him and used over again, had gone instead to merchants. They, in turn, intended to ship it Outside to pay for new supplies to fill their depleted shelves.

Cal called a meeting that afternoon. Marcia, Nathan Land and the two men who held the liquor and gambling concessions in the Blue Moon were present. "How're you fixed?" he asked them bluntly.

"Liquor stock is low," one man answered, "and I haven't the money to buy any more, Cal. I loaned it to you. I'm not kicking, but I'm doing some tall thinking."

"I don't need any stock," was the gambler's reply. "But if some lucky cuss should hit my game, I'd have to pay off in an I O U. The boys wouldn't like that."

"And I'm down to bedrock, Cal," Marcia admitted.

"Even to the money you were saving to put yourself over in musical comedy?" asked Cal.

"Yes," she said, "even to that. It

was no time for halfway measures."

"You're right there," Cal agreed gloomily. "It was no time for halfway measures, but I didn't expect you to go that far. I think the brutal truth is that Gorst's men Outside have cut off old Gid Riley at the pockets. There's a southbound steamer due to pass off the inlet tomorrow and I'm going to catch it. If you'll all give me a list of what you need, I'll send it north on the first boat. Also, I'll send what the Riley Construction Co. borrowed. And don't think it didn't help plenty. At least the stampedeers left thinking the company was solvent."

"What about the others who were left behind and haven't been paid yet?" Nathan asked.

"We'll have to stall them off," said Cal. "That'll be your job, Nathan. You can explain the stampede cleaned me out of so many men that I've gone to Seattle to recruit another crew. And that won't be far from the truth."

NATHAN remained after the others left. "What're we going to do for money if the old man can't raise it?" he asked bluntly. "It'll take a million to finish the road from Glacier Inlet through to the east end of Icy Lake." He shook his head soberly. "And a million can't be borrowed overnight, particularly when Gorst is throwing monkey wrenches into the machinery."

"Gid Riley's name is almost as good as a government bond," Cal argued. "On a stock issue, it'll raise a million in a hurry."

"That's true," agreed Nathan. "But suppose Gid turned the railroad-building enterprise into a stock company, sold shares and some of the shares fell into Gorst's hands? Some stockholders would be sure to unload if Gorst made it worth while.

Then Gorst could go into court with some trumped-up charge, force a receivership and stop operations."

"That's right," Cal agreed. "But I didn't intend Gid should turn the railroad into a stock company. What's the matter with a gold mine?"

"Gold mine? Are you crazy, Cal?" Nathan asked incredulously.

"I'm serious," Cal told him. "At one point, you know, we had the choice of building the road up Timber Creek or up Bear Creek. We could go from the headwaters of either across Spruce Bench to Tunnel."

"Yes," Nathan said patiently, "I know that. Didn't I survey both routes? Timber Creek's cheaper by a hundred thousand dollars. There'd be a tremendous amount of filling required along Bear Creek. We'd have to do a lot of cribbing, then fill in the space behind with gravel and boulders to handle the water in the flood season. Otherwise the road would be washed out. We'd need a tremendous amount of gravel for ballasting. So why do it?"

"Here's why," Cal explained. "The public knows, generally, that the mineral land in Poor Man's Hell that couldn't be worked without steam transportation is being made valuable by the construction of the railroad. That's thoroughly fixed in the public mind. Now, if we explain that we're putting the road through Bear instead of Timber Creek for the same reason, Bear Creek property becomes valuable. And we own it."

"I get it," Nathan nodded. "We organize the mining company, then sell the company our land on Bear Creek. The money we get enables us to finish the road. But the stockholders in the mining company would be left holding the bag."

Continued on page 105

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Continued from page 103

"There's gold in the gravel," Cal pointed out.

"But it costs so much to handle the gravel," argued Nathan, "there'd be no profit."

"Will you take my word for it, Nathan, that we'll work out a scheme to make the operation cheap enough so there will be a profit?" Cal asked.

"Yes, if you say so," Nathan answered without hesitation. "It will certainly put old Gid beyond reach of the money-lending lads who want to squeeze the last drop of blood out of him."

"And it'll give the little fellows a chance to make some money in the mining game," Cal added.

"If your plan works," Nathan said a bit skeptically. He didn't question Cal's honesty, but he was wondering if enthusiasm wasn't getting the better of the young man's judgment. "Another thing, if Horst can make the Bear Creek mining deal look shady, he'll do it, and the devil only knows what'll happen to you then."

"That's a chance I'll have to take," Cal admitted. "Now here's what I want you to do while I'm away getting the mining company organized. Take the men we have left and put 'em where they're needed most. Organize a crew and drive grade stakes up Bear Creek Canyon, then across Spruce Bench to Tunnel."

Nathan nodded. By afternoon he had every available man and horse packing equipment to Bear Creek Canyon. He even planned to float the ties scattered along Timber Creek to the Timber Creek bridge and take them aboard the construction train when steel reached that point. Nathan Land was a saving man.

AN Indian canoe, with sails up and a good man at the steering paddle could outdistance any steam launch on Glacier Bay. Cal decided to use such a canoe in his effort to intercept the southbound steamer. It had the additional advantage of being able to outride any storm they might meet; nor did it require a huge coal supply to make a long trip.

Cal sent word through a breed that he wanted the canoe on hand at daybreak, but it was eight o'clock in the morning before it appeared. "Where in the hell have you been?" Cal demanded, speaking to the one member of the crew who could speak good English. The man merely scowled, glanced at the others, said something to them in dialect and began to paddle.

As soon as they were in the inlet they put up the sail, and with a stiff breeze coming down the inlet, the sharp bow knifed through the water.

Cal sensed something out of the ordinary, and it had been his experience the unusual often indicated trouble in the offing. "What's the matter, Blue Bear, you boys sleep late this morning?" he asked.

Blue Bear, who had been named after the glacier bear, merely grunted. After some time he thawed slightly. "We see ghost man on creek," he explained. "No paddle down creek. Carry canoe to another creek. Take long time."

"A ghost man, eh?" Cal scoffed. "I didn't think you believed in such nonsense any more. Hell, Blue Bear, you went to the mission school. You learned to read, write and talk big like the white men. What's this ghost business?"

"You 'member big slide catch 'em man?" Blue Bear asked. "Him ghost on Salmon Creek."

Cal stiffened. "Do you mean you

saw Caboose Riley on Salmon Creek?" he demanded hoarsely.

Blue Bear shook his head emphatically. "Caboose Riley under slide. Him ghost—"

"Listen, Blue Bear, you head this canoe for the mouth of Salmon Creek quicker than hell can skin a liver." Cal ordered excitedly. "You boys don't have to go upstream with me, but you're taking me there—even if I have to throw a six-gun on you."

The others understood the command. They grew sullen, but offered no resistance. Blue Bear steered the canoe across the inlet and into the mouth of a salmon stream. "Now you walk," he told Cal firmly.

"No, you boys are going to stay here, and I'll pole the canoe upstream," Cal said. As soon as they had taken down the sails, he landed them on a bar; then, standing in the stern, he drove the canoe steadily against the current. At some places he had to jump overboard, disregarding the icy water and push the canoe ahead of him.

He watched both banks for any sign of footprints. When he reached a waterfall he tied up to the bank and continued afoot. At last he found a faint footprint on a sandbar and a partly eaten salmon nearby. He broke into a trot and presently found a print so fresh the water had not yet filled it.

The trail was plain from this point, but it was not easy to follow. Tearing through brush, floundering through swampy areas, with the trail growing fresher, Cal raced until he was staggering with exhaustion. Sweat poured down his face, and wherever his mosquito net brushed against his moist skin, it stuck. Great lumps raised where the mosquitoes poisoned him. He hardly noticed them. Then as he smashed through a thicket, he came almost

face to face with a tense, wild-looking creature.

Cal stared at the torn clothing, the great masses of muck spread over face, hair and hands to ward off the mosquitoes. He knew it was Caboose by the man's posture and certain little mannerisms. At the same instant Caboose saw him.

"Where's Cal?" Caboose asked. His voice was toneless, as if he had repeated the query many times and now despaired of an answer.

Cal's first impulse was to say, "I'm Cal." Then he realized that wasn't the most effective way of meeting the situation. He sensed only one weak link connected Caboose with sanity and that was himself. If the link broke, the boy might never recover.

"I'll find Cal," he said quietly.

Even then Caboose didn't seem to know what Cal was talking about. Cal approached warily, expecting Caboose to take fright and attempt to outrun him. But even a sick brain couldn't touch Caboose's stanch courage. He stood his ground fearlessly waiting for Cal to approach.

Cal extended his hand and Caboose shook it. "Come on," he said gently, "I'll find Cal for you." He made no attempt to take Caboose's arm, nor to speak further. He turned as if he were entirely confident that the boy would follow, but he put in several bad seconds waiting to hear footsteps behind him. Suddenly he heard the crackle of brush and he knew Caboose was following.

CHAPTER XX

A BARREL OF MONEY

AFTER only a moment of hesitation, Caboose settled himself in the bow of the canoe, and Cal picked up the steering paddle and

Continued on page 108

GOING BALD?

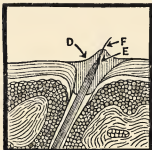
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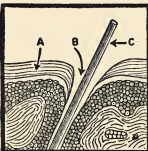
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Continued from page 106

shoved off. He paddled constantly to maintain sufficient headway to swing the bow clear of the stream's sharp turns. Points where he had lined up now aided him.

Landing at the creek mouth, Cal yelled for Blue Bear. There was no answer. Cal almost lost his temper. "Damned superstitious fools," he muttered. "They've cleared out. And I've got to catch a steamer."

But first it was necessary to get clean, dry clothing on Caboose. Cal stripped off the boy's mud-covered clothing, then scrubbed him from head to foot. He didn't like the scar on Caboose's head. It looked as if there might be pressure on the brain at that point. Caboose was able to dress himself, but he put on the clothes slowly, like a child not quite sure of himself. Cal bathed in the creek, donned the one other suit he had brought and cached the discarded clothing in a tree. Then he shoved off.

As soon as he had paddled into the inlet, Cal got up the sails. He took almost foolhardy chances, cutting over bars and sailing through water boiling around reefs, but he made time. He could feel the lift and fall of the sea as soon as he was clear of the last headland. There was a cloud of smoke on the horizon's edge. Few ships frequented the region, and Cal was fairly certain the smoke cloud marked the position of the steamer.

He tried to guess the steamer's speed, and that of the canoe, then he laid a course that would intersect the larger boat. A half-hour passed before he sighted her stack and masts. Gradually the steamer took definite shape.

"That's her," he declared. "Cal's on her, Pat."

Cal thought perhaps the boy

might recall his given name sooner than a nickname. He repeated it often. Caboose offered no comment, other than his frequent query for Cal.

The strong wind which had carried the canoe along at incredible speed, now died down to a lazy breeze. Cal stood up and waved a shirt tied to the pole he had used to push the canoe up the creek. He kept the canoe on its course until the steamer passed the expected point of meeting, then he took down the sails and waved the shirt constantly. The steamer moved on at full speed for five minutes, then suddenly turned around and came back. She stopped two hundred feet from the canoe.

"I thought you were natives," the skipper shouted. "Then a passenger reported you had lowered your sail and were waving a white rag."

"That rag was my best shirt," Cal answered. "I'm Cal Jessup, Riley Construction Co. superintendent. I've a sick man here. I want passage for both of us to Seattle."

"What're you going to do with the canoe?"

"Swing it aboard," Cal answered, "I'll pay the freight. We might want to come back with you and the canoe will save you putting into Glacier Inlet."

Sailors rigged slings, which Cal placed under the hull, bow, stern and amidships. A few minutes later the canoe was hoisted aboard. The purser provided a cabin and sent down a steward who knew something about wounds. The man looked over Caboose's head carefully.

"This healed up a long time ago," he said, "but I don't like the look of it at all. We'll keep him quiet. Wasn't there a doctor in Warm Creek?"

"Not available," Cal answered.

He had thought of taking Caboose to Doc Hill, but he knew the boy would be charged with Herb Wise's murder the instant John Law laid eyes on him. He reasoned that Caboose had survived thus far under terrible physical conditions; a few days on a steamer couldn't make much difference one way or another.

SIXTY hours passed without incident. Cal kept the door locked nights because he didn't want Caboose wandering around. He awakened one night to find Caboose tugging at the door. Cal turned on the light and heard the boy mutter, "Where the hell am I?"

"On a ship bound for Seattle," Cal answered.

Caboose looked around, startled. "Cal!" he exclaimed. "It's you!" The joy in his voice was almost pathetic. He grasped Cal's hand and clung to it. "Listen," he begged. "Lock me up. Do anything, but don't let me go wandering again. I've been hunting for you for . . . for years, I guess. And, damn it, I never could find you. I figured you could help me out. Help me get rid of these hellish pains I have in my head."

Cal made the excited boy sit down in a chair. He wrapped a blanket around him, then sat down on the settee. From the steamer's depths came the soothing throb of the engine. The wooded shores of the Inland Passage, faintly visible in the twilight, moved slowly past their porthole.

"Hadn't you better rest?" Cal asked.

"No. I've been through this before," Caboose explained. "I remember the slide, and going back and grabbing a packer's arm. Did I get him out?"

"I'm afraid you didn't, Caboose," Cal answered.

"That's tough," said Caboose. "Something hit me and knocked me out, I guess. I woke up covered with blood and gasping for air. I remember clawing and clawing at loose snow and coming out between two boulders. It was snowing and I began walking. It was all kind of like a dream or a nightmare.

"If you had only walked to the campfire," Cal said. "It burned all night."

"I must have been in a complete mental fog," Caboose explained. "I walked a long way on a frozen creek and crossed a ridge. I found a small game trail. There was just room enough for my feet, but the brush kept scratching my clothes. It was that narrow. Then things went black. Later, I don't know how long it was, I snapped out of it and found myself in a cabin. A prospector told me his dogs had found me. He said I was in a bad way from the frost and he thawed out my feet."

"There're a lot of weeks you haven't accounted for," Cal reminded. "Think hard."

"I must've been at the cabin quite a while," Caboose continued, "because the snow piled up to the eaves and the prospector told me we couldn't get out. I remember shoveling snow, cutting wood, and telling him I'd square the account some day. I felt that if I could only find you, you'd take me to Doc Hill or somebody, and I'd get well again. I kept asking for you. One day he said he'd take me to Warm Creek."

"There was a rumor you had been seen," Cal put in.

"I heard Gorst's voice," Caboose went on, "and Shultz's, too. A couple of men were always around. I heard them talking of you. I'd been in a

daze for a long time, I guess. It seemed as if I slept for hours. There was talk of dumping me in the inlet. I can't remember very much, but I made the break one night. Nobody stopped me. I saw the Blue Moon, but I didn't get to it. Something must've happened. The old blackness came back, I guess. The next think I knew I was smeared with muck, hungry, and the mosquitoes were eating me alive."

Cal didn't question him any further. He felt he might tax his memory too much. He turned the conversation into other channels. He told of the progress made on the railroad, but said nothing of the trouble he was having. "I'm going to Seattle to report to your uncle," he concluded.

"But how'd you find me?" Caboose asked curiously.

CAL brought the story down to date, then suggested they both get some sleep. When he awakened in the morning, he got up and began to dress. Presently the younger man stirred and then stared up from his bunk.

"Hello, Caboose," Cal said cheerfully. "Suppose we go down into the dining room and get measured for ham and eggs?"

Caboose gazed at him blankly, and mumbled his old question, "Where's Cal?"

"We'll find him," Cal answered. He finished dressing in a depressed mood and stepped outside to breathe the fresh air, watch the scenery, and try to decide whether Caboose had found himself during the night, and then slipped back into the fog again, or whether the episode had been a dream.

They ate breakfast in their room. Cal didn't want to take Caboose to the dining room and have people

stare at him. The steamer was sliding smoothly through Seymour Narrows on a favorable tide when Caboose again regained his normal senses. But he was in the fog when they arrived in Seattle.

Cal hurried him to one of the doctors who had treated Gid Riley. The physician was grave, but encouraging. "A clot may be causing a pressure on the brain," he said. "When the pressure is greatest, his memory is a blank. As soon as the pressure eases up, he's himself again. Until I am able to determine the extent of the injury, I can't give a conclusive verdict. But I believe the clot is slowly dissolving and that more and more he will be himself. That occasionally happens."

"We'll have to leave him here in the hospital," Cal said. "I'll keep in close touch with you. Now I'm going up to see his uncle, Gid Riley. He's still here, isn't he?"

"No, he's home with a nurse," the doctor answered. "He's been championing at the bit, I'm afraid. I wish you'd try to convince him he isn't needed on the job."

"I'll do my best," Cal promised. He didn't relish the job. He got into a cab and gave the address of Gid's home on the outskirts of Seattle. He was still uncertain how to lead up to the serious matters that were on his mind when he poked his head into Gid room and said, "Howdy, you old war horse!"

"Cal Jessup! What the devil are you doin' down here?" Gid roared. He seemed a different man from the invalid Cal had seen last. "Ah, I know. The money ain't comin' through like it should. I've known there was somethin' in the wind right along. But I'm surrounded by shushers. They shush me every time I open my mouth. How's the road

go in? What's that old sawbones, Doc Hill doin'?"

Cal shook hands and tried to answer all the questions at once. But in a moment Gid had interrupted him. "Say, the worst offender around here is a man named Sharon. He's made raids on my stocks. They forgot to keep the newspapers from me, and I read about it. He must've cost me a half million dollars, maybe more."

"Let him raid," Cal answered. "I've got a scheme of my own."

"Let's have it," said Gid. "But first, how's the Caboose getting along? Has he got the stuff?"

"Plenty!" Cal answered hastily. "Now—"

But Gid Riley was too keen a man to be fooled easily. "Shut up, not a peep out of you until I've asked more questions about Caboose," he interrupted. "Somethin's wrong. I saw it in your face just now. Did the kid show a white feather, or is he shy on brains?"

"Nothing like that." Cal took a deep breath and squared off. He told what he knew of Caboose's experiences. He's down here under observation, and he's going to pull out of this in good shape," he concluded. "I hope by that time to clear him of the charge of murdering Herb Wise."

"Wise wouldn't be the first man killed because he stuck to his rights when somebody wanted to build a railroad," Gid said.

"I've heard that before," Cal answered. "And it's true, I guess. Now about Dan. He isn't very happy. He's always getting licked. Even Nathan Land whipped him in a rough-and-tumble fight."

"Nathan?" Gid looked surprised. "I thought he was an engineer, not a fighter. Though I've had a sneakin' hunch at times he couldn't be crowded too far. But it's too bad Dan couldn't win at least one fight. It breaks a man's spirit to lose too



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often. But Dan had it coming to him. He's always been a kind of a weak sister. Now for a report."

CAL talked for nearly two hours, frequently interrupted by Gid's rapid-fire queries. "And that's all except my money-raising scheme," he finished. "It means building the road up Bear Creek instead of Timber Creek."

"Nonsense," Gid exploded. "Timber Creek's the logical route."

"I'll argue the point."

"Argue, then," Gid said defiantly.

Cal argued, and Gid listened. Bit by bit he came around to Cal's viewpoint. "It'll work, maybe," he said when Cal has finished, "but you're in for it, son, if Tuck Gorst learns what you're up to. I know the very man to put the thing over, though. He'll raise a barrel of money before you can say 'Jack Robinson.'"

"What's his name?"

"His name's Flannel-mouth Gardner. He can charm a bird off a bush, sell you something you don't need, and talk you out of your rights and make you like it," Gid answered. "You'll find him down in the Gardner Block. He talked the owners into naming it after him. But watch out, he'll talk you out of your profits."

Cal decided to strike while the iron was hot. He found Flannel-mouth in an optimistic mood and ready to drive a hard bargain, but he could tell by the man's cuffs he wasn't getting his fair share of the world's goods. His clothing was faultless, but the frayed cuffs were a giveaway.

"What do you charge to put over a stock deal?" Cal asked.

"Forty percent," Flannel-mouth answered. "It costs a lot of money in advertising, entertainment, you know, and—"

"I'll eliminate all that cost," Cal interrupted. "You inform the busi-

ness world that the Riley Construction people are forming a mining corporation, to be called the Bear Creek Development Co. Issue a hundred thousand shares of stock at ten dollars a share. You know what Gid Riley's name to a deal means. The railroad will run through the property. That's another talking point. We'll give you fifty thousand dollars to put the deal through, and you can do it in thirty days," he concluded. "Draw up all papers and bring them around for Gid Riley's signature. Now, good day, Mr. Gardner, it's a pleasure to do business with a man who doesn't beat about the bush and who knows a good thing when he sees it."

Cal reported to Gid the following noon. The old-timer was grinning. "Flannel-mouth was just here. He wanted to know whether you were a mental case or the real McCoy. I told him a little of both, but that the deal was on the level. How'd you manage to put it over?"

"I took one look, listened to one sentence, then realized unless I talked fast I'd lose my shirt," Cal answered. "So I talked fast, then ran like hell."

CHAPTER XXI

RUMORS

CAL had left the films he had taken at a photographer's. Two days after his return he picked up the finished prints. Some of them were bad, some ordinary, and a few were good. But even the bad ones revealed the progress the Riley Construction Co. had been making and confirmed much Cal had reported. The pictures of Windy Gap were the best. They showed rails running through the huge snow drift that choked the pass many months of the year.

Armed with his photograph, Cal called on the group Gid Riley had originally applied to for a loan. This banking group, advised, no doubt, by Gorst's Mr. Sharon, had wanted actual pictures of the completed work. Cal displayed his. The chairman was slightly patronizing.

"Since we held up the loan pending the arrival of photographs," he said, "we hoped, with their arrival, to make a favorable report. But now there have been other, and unforeseen, developments."

"Yes?"

"Rumors, perhaps, but serious enough to warrant investigation," the chairman continued bluntly. "A ship arrived from the North early this morning. It is rumored that you failed to meet your last payroll; that you borrowed from everyone including dance hall girls and gamblers; that your men have all gone on a gold stampede; and work is at a standstill."

"Under those circumstances," Cal said, rising, "I can hardly expect you to make a loan. I'm sorry we can't get together. And naturally you wouldn't question your Mr. Sharon's reports."

That his attitude surprised them was obvious by the glances they exchanged. Mr. Sharon's part in the business wasn't supposed to be known. Cal picked up his hat and was near the door when the chairman stopped him.

"Perhaps if you can explain the rumor—" he ventured.

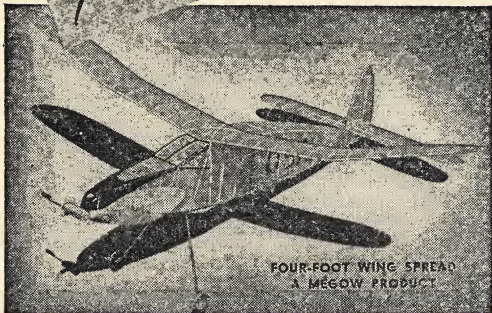
"A rumor is a hard thing to fight," Cal observed. "We're getting along all right. We could use three or four hundred thousand dollars, but we don't have to have it. As to our men quitting us, many of them did stampede, but if you'll call the steamship ticket office you'll learn

Continued on page 116

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Continued from page 113

we haven't booked passage for a new crew. Nor do we intend to do so."

"But you need men, don't you?"

"Mr. Sharon evidently thinks so," said Cal. "Suppose you decide how you feel about this, and let me know."

They evidently decided Cal was running a bluff and that his indifference was a pose. While he was fairly sure the million raised on the gold mine stock deal would be enough to complete the road, nevertheless, he wanted a lusty backlog to draw on in case something went wrong.

The next day rumors circulated through the Skidroad that the Riley Construction Co. was going broke and that a man was a fool to go North expecting to make any money. Cal made a half-hearted effort to run down the rumor, more to satisfy his curiosity than anything else. In the end he decided it wasn't worth the trouble. Undoubtedly Sharon or his men were getting in a few below-the-belt punches.

CAL heard nothing from the bank for several days. Then one bright Monday morning Flannelmouth Gardner's stock promotion scheme, bearing the magic name of Gid Riley, caught the financial district off its guard. The Sunday papers had carried advertisements and full accounts. There were pictures Cal had taken of the Windy Gap tracks, the townsite and other points of interest.

When Cal returned to his hotel Monday noon there was a call from the banking group. At their invitation he dropped around at two o'clock and found the board in session. The atmosphere was distinctly warmer. And while the chairman didn't exactly tuck a cigar into Cal's mouth and light it for him, it ap-

parently would not have taken much for him to have done so.

"We made our decision last Friday afternoon," the chairman explained. "We . . . er . . . expected a call from you sometime Saturday."

"I really didn't expect you would loan us the money," Cal said bluntly. "You didn't seem to have much faith in us, and we don't want the backing of dubious people. They're always worrying us, asking how things are going and taking up time needed on the construction job."

"We checked up with the steamboat people," the chairman explained, "and learned that you weren't sending men North. We reasoned there couldn't be too much discontentment among your crew, and that too many of them couldn't have gone stampeding to Ruby River. We did, however, learn that every steamer is booked solid from steerage to suite."

"People bound for the Ruby River stamped," said Cal. "I've ordered supplies for stampedeers. Our company store should do a healthy business."

"What do you think of it?" the chairman asked.

"If you'll call your Mr. Sharon into the room, I'll tell you," Cal promised. "And if you don't call him here, I'll refuse to accept the loan you're now ready to make. It's time you gentlemen got a few blunt facts instead of listening to baseless rumors."

A murmur ran up and down the table. "I don't think that's necessary," the chairman began.

"I do. I'd like to expose this man Sharon for what he is," Cal said hotly. "And I'm going to do so. Otherwise, he'll be up to his old tricks again."

An hour later an urbane gentle-

man, with a smooth manner and a voice that would inspire confidence in a bowl of jelly was introduced to Cal.

"I'm not glad to meet you, Sharon," Cal declared bluntly, "but I'm glad you're here. Maybe if I can convince these gentlemen here that you're making more blunders than the Riley Construction Co. they'll have more faith in me."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Sharon. But he was obviously disconcerted.

"I'm disappointed in you, Sharon," Cal declared. "I expected a stronger come-back than that. Boiled down, gentlemen, it amounts to this. Gorst and Sharon are out to block the completion of the road on time. They expect to pick up the Riley Construction Co. wreckage for a song. Gorst—and by him I mean the man representing him, too—have actually taken to salting mines. How do I know? They salted me, and Doc Hill took out enough nuggets to pay his fee many times over." Cal related the episode at the snow slide and a laugh ran through the group.

Cal grinned and continued. "I don't know what method they used in the Ruby River stampede, but it was salted all right. I know the country and it's hungry ground. With his usual thoroughness Gorst went along with the rest of the stampede to make it look as if he were a sucker also—and to destroy any evidence that might point his way. The real purpose was to turn my construction crews into stampedeers. And it worked. It slowed us down to beat hell. Sharon, here, thought I was down for another crew. He circulated reports we were going broke, and I doubt if I could get a crew if I wanted one."

"But what are you going to do for men?" asked the chairman.

"The whole thing will prove a boomerang," Cal declared. "The stampedeers will come back with few



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exceptions. More are going North on every ship. Nothing can stop them. They'll learn it's a false alarm and we'll have more men than we can use. A few will scatter and keep prospecting. They'll probably uncover one or two good hard-rock propositions, and that'll make business for the railroad in years to come. On the whole, the Riley Construction Co. has been helped."

Mr. Sharon said nothing. And he continued to say it, for the simple reason Cal had called the turn. He knew Cal couldn't prove many of the things he had said, but he also knew he dare not dispute the statements because he had filled the ears of the various members with rumors.

"The money will be available, Mr. Jessup," the chairman said, "as soon as Mr. Riley has signed the necessary papers." He cleared his throat. "Now will it be desirable for Flannelmouth Gardner to go ahead with this gold-mining scheme? A million dollars is a lot of money to take out of the investment market, you know."

"He'll go ahead, because it'll give the little fellows a chance to make money," Cal answered. "And who knows? Maybe a year from now the investment market will get back the million it will lose this year, and another one with it. And besides we can use it nicely on the job."

WITH the needed money assured and supplies moving North, Cal wound up his Seattle business by making two calls. The first one was on Gid Riley.

"Seems like things are comin' your way for a change," Gid observed. "It's about time you had a breathin' spell. Now what're your plans?"

"Finish the road before February 1st," Cal answered. "Bundle you up and have you drive the golden spike."

"Confound your impudence, Cal, I'll be up there long before the

spike's driven," Gid shouted. "I'm goin' to be in that last battle. Remember when you was a kid in the stone fight? Well, I couldn't line up with you in that one, but by hell I'll be scrappin' at your side before the job's done. Say, how's Caboose gettin' along?"

"The doctors will make a final check in a week or so, then send him here for a rest. Better keep him here as long as you can. If he shows up around Warm Creek they'll charge him with murder. And I'd like to be free of a murder trial for a while yet."

Cal's second call was on Caboose. He found the younger man fretting and impatient to be out of the hospital. "I've been out of the fog five days straight now," Caboose said. "And what's more important—"

"Nothing's more important," Cal interrupted.

"You're wrong. Listen to this. I'm beginning to remember things that happened to me—that is, things that happened when I had my normal periods. I can remember Shultz and Gorst talking. They're pretty sure the stampede, lack of money and all that will stop you from finishing the job on time. But if not, they've got you blocked at Icy Lake, or they think they have."

"Grade stakes were driven from one end of the lake to the other," Cal said, "and nobody kicked about it. We've got a right of way through there. How can they hold us up legally?"

"I don't know. And if they try to hold you up any other way there'll be a battle," Caboose said. "Maybe I'll remember something more that'll help out. You might check on the Icy Lake right of way anyway."

"I'll do that the first thing," Cal said. "Well, s'long, Caboose. Sorry you haven't had a chance at more

fighting, but you did your bit." He gave the younger man a parting slap on the shoulder and left.

CHAPTER XXII

THE FATTED CALF

THE voyage North was made without incident. The ship was packed with stampeder and some of the first-class passengers had to sleep on the social-hall seats. In the steerage it was practically impossible to move around. There were five and six sittings each meal and therefore eating was practically a continuous process. Old-timers claimed it reminded them of the '98 stampede.

Most of Warm Creek's population was on hand when the steamer docked. And a very thin population it proved to be. Anxious merchants with depleted shelves besieged the freight clerk and purser about shipments; saloonkeepers were out of stock and demanded to know how many cases of liquor had been shipped North. Then there was Nathan Land, looking a little thinner and more worried, waiting for Cal at the foot of the gangway. A few feet away Marcia and Dan Riley were talking. They came over as soon as they saw Cal.

"Jessup," Dan said, "Indians reported you had located what they called my brother's ghost. Is it true?"

"Yes. He's down in Seattle in a hospital," Cal answered. "He'll be all right."

"I was on the trail headed for Ruby River when I heard the rumor," Dan explained. "Naturally, I turned back. Mr. Gorst and Shultz said it was the thing I should do. They generously offered to stake claims for me on Ruby River."

John Law, who had been standing within hearing distance of the group,

came over. "I am going down and bring Caboose Riley back for trial, Mr. Jessup," he said. "I'm telling you this so you can prepare your defense. I don't want to be accused of railroading a man who made a hero of himself at the snowslide, but who callously killed an old man."

"That's pretty fine of you," Cal answered, "but I'm afraid you'll have a time finding Caboose. Nevertheless, we'll take your advice and prepare a defense."

Cal turned to Marcia, who merely shook hands with him and hurried away. She knew Nathan Land was burdened with troubles, and that Cal would be busy shouldering some of them.

NATHAN hurried Cal to the office. "We've paid off the men with the first money we received from you," he said. "And they're satisfied—what's left of them. I also paid off Marcia and others who loaned you money. By the way, a big investor from New York was here looking over the mineral possibilities of the country the road will open. Fortunately, Gorst was on the Ruby River stampede and didn't meet him."

"What did the man from New York think?"

"He said he'd come back when the road was completed and put his men in the field. I think he's interested in coal, but he'll develop copper and gold deposits if they look promising. By the way he dropped into the Blue Moon one night and heard Marcia sing. He was enthusiastic, says he knows some producers in New York and is going to arrange an audition for her."

Cal was conscious of a feeling of depression at the thought of Marcia leaving Warm Creek, and his life, but he shook it off. "She certainly

deserves it, Nathan!" he declared with forced heartiness.

"I thought you should know, so you could at least pretend cheerfulness when she tells you," Nathan said. "Now here's what I've done in your absence. I've put every available man on the Bear Creek section of the road. The preliminary work is about finished. It would have been finished if I'd had enough men. Cal, this stampede really hurt us. I see you brought several hundred men with you." He shook his head. "But with this gold madness in the air, you can't hold them."

"I didn't bring a man," Cal answered. "I knew I couldn't hold them. The boys you saw are stampedeers, chechahcos, mostly, who'll probably get lost. Some of them will die."

"Every stampede and railroad has graves to mark its course," said Nathan. "Well, let's have a look at our road."

The road was completed to Bear Creek. The ties floated down Timber Creek had been piled up near the right of way where they could be quickly loaded for use up the line.

"Here's the lumber you ordered," said Nathan, indicating several stacks of heavy boards. "I can't see what you can use for."

"Cribbing, flumes, and so on," Cal answered. Ahead, crews of men were pushing supplies over a temporary road. "Here's the plan. Build flumes and sluice boxes. Leave openings in the bottoms of the sluice boxes—slots—for the mud and lighter material to drop through. I'll want a sufficient head of water to keep the gravel and heavier rocks moving. Steam shovels can pick up dirt from the bench that parallels the road and feed it to the boxes. The boxes empty the heavy material into fills, and behind the cribbing we use

to protect the roadbed from the river. The large stones can be used to break the force of the stream against the cribbing. Is all this clear?"

"Clear enough," Nathan answered, "but I don't see the sense in separating the material. It's a slower and more expensive way. Why not dump mud along with the gravel and rocks?"

"It'll wash away," explained Cal. "We'll need it later as binder for the loose rocks."

"Engineers often quarrel with the way construction people carry out their plans, Cal, but I'm not going to try to argue you out of anything. However, I think the plan is expensive and to no purpose."

"We'll let it go at that," Cal answered with a grin that told Nathan he was holding some card up his sleeve.

They got back to town late in the evening. Cal washed up, changed his clothes and dropped into the Blue Moon. Marcia was singing to a small house, which made up in enthusiasm what it lacked in numbers. It struck Cal that the girl had improved even during the time he was away.

WHEN the program was over and the construction gang began dancing with the girls, Marcia and Cal went back to the girl's own quarters. She had a comfortable living room, bedroom and kitchen. She prepared her own meals because she enjoyed cooking. Tonight she set out a tempting meal she had prepared especially for Cal, including a blueberry pie she had made that afternoon.

When they had finished, they settled themselves in comfortable chairs with Cal smoking and Marcia staring thoughtfully at the flames in the fireplace.

"Nathan told me about Broadway," Cal said. "I'm glad. You'll

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go a long way, Marcia."

"And you?"

"There's plenty to do here," he replied, "and will be for years to come. But when we've delivered the last pound of freight to Poor Man's Hell, I'll call my job done. Then I'll light out for the Rio Paloma country in Mexico. If the government hasn't whipped the crowd in the saddle, well, I'll have to take along enough men to make them listen to reason."

"What about the men who stamped and left you flat, Cal?" Marcia asked. "You should be hard and unrelenting with them, I suppose, but I can't blame anyone who wants to make a lot of money in a hurry. It comes so slowly the normal way."

"I decided on their fate several days ago," Cal told her. "I'm having a sign painted. I'll put it over the Ruby River Trail where it comes into town. Here's an idea of it."

She looked at the paper he spread before her.

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"I think that's wonderful," Marcia exclaimed. "Cal, you're pretty swell, in case someone hasn't told you."

Cal tried not to look too pleased by her words. "They'll be broke, discouraged, and expecting me to kick them out of camp or give them a blue ticket out of the country," he explained. "The sign will cheer them up."

"And just what is the fatted calf?"

"Corned beef and cabbage some days of the week, Irish stew on others," answered Cal, "but it'll taste like turkey after bucking that Ruby River country." He grinned. "Your business will be rotten. They'll all arrive dead broke."

"My business has been rotten before," she answered. "If I reach

Broadway, I'll sing to empty seats at times." Then she wanted to hear all of the news Outside. Cal told her. Later the girls drifted in one by one as they came off duty, and Cal reported on conditions as he had found them among their families.

"All of 'em are well and happy and hope you'll come home soon," he concluded. One by one they left, saddened as the separation was again brought home to them, gladdened because their children were physically well.

After they had all left, Cal stood up and reached for his hat. "I suppose I'd better pull my freight," he told Marcia without enthusiasm.

"I suppose you had," she said with an equal lack of it.

They stood close, near the door. To both it had seemed good to be together again, and they were reluctant to end the evening. Cal was thrillingly conscious of Marcia's nearness and the sweetness of her. He stood holding her small hands in the palms of his big ones. Suddenly he pulled her toward him gently and kissed her. When at last he lifted his lips from hers, he said, "I've wanted to do this a lot of times, Marcia."

"And I've wanted you to do it—a lot of times," she answered.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SUN SWINGS SOUTH

A SHIPLOAD of stamperders arrived just in time to meet the first party returning from Ruby River. They received some soberly given advice. "Don't go," the returning contingent advised. "It's hungry country. Some of the fellows did strike pockets and took out a few hundred dollars above expenses, and a man can make wages coyoting,

working the cracks in the river bed, but the country won't support even a tinhorn stampede. Better get a job and go to work."

As a result, the Riley Construction Co.'s employment office was now swamped. The men who had quit their jobs sheepishly asked for them back.

Cal made no attempt to estimate the time lost on the job as the result of the stampede. He only knew it had been the most effective blow Tuck Gorst had struck so far. And yet, if he managed to finish the job on time, the stampede would prove profitable. Men in the hills meant new mines. He wasn't bluffing when he made that statement to Sharon and the board of trustees of that Seattle financial group.

Slowly the rails pushed up the Bear Creek Canyon. Steam shovels working twenty-four-hour shifts ate deeply into the bench along the right of way. A constant stream of earth and gravel spilled into the flumes. Water and muck went through the slots in the bottoms of sluices boxes and flumes, but feeder streams pouring into the boxes kept the heavier gravel moving. Men turned the outlets on points where they wanted to use the rocks, and when one given job was finished the box was shifted to the next.

Excess water squirted through the cribbing, and when the last of it had drained and the area dried, it had settled so that the tracks needed but little ballasting. There were days when the shovels worked far ahead, and other days when the earth to be moved was so vast, the track layers were close enough to howl taunts and insults.

Summer was well advanced when they left Bear Creek behind and pushed steel across Spruce Ridge and

through the tunnel Hurley's men had driven. They laid rails across Caribou Valley and bolted them to the track in Windy Gap. They shot through the Gap and headed straight for Icy Lake. Man power, and nothing else, picked up the time lost by the stampede.

Strangely enough, Tuck Gorst and Bull Shultz appeared to be inactive as far as blocking the construction work was concerned. They continued to pose as men who bought and sold mining claims and did development work on the side. But they didn't deceive Cal. It was the lull before the storm.

Miners came out of the Poor Man's Hell country, saw rails within a mile of Icy Lake and were convinced they would have steam transportation shortly after snow began to fly. They checked with Dan Riley, who held their powers of attorney where dealings with the road were concerned, and he convinced them he held the whip hand over the Riley Construction Co. in the form of a contract to deliver two trainloads of mining equipment by February 1st.

Thus encouraged, numbers of miners went Outside, formed stock groups, bought equipment and ordered it shipped to Warm Creek. They carried orders, too, from their wives, covering necessities and certain luxuries, things like brooms and other household items that men couldn't pack into the country on their backs.

Looking over the list, it seemed to Cal as if every woman in the area, and the men living alone had ordered from one to three new brooms. Cloth, clothing, furniture and fresh vegetables were in great demand. It would take three trainloads at least to deliver everything.

THE drillers, working far ahead, were blasting rock into Icy Lake when steel reached the frigid waters. A mile of well-blasted roadbed lay behind Hurley and his gang. Two miles of untouched walls, rising swiftly from the lake, lay ahead of them. In those two miles there were a dozen points where solid rock leaped from the lake. Mostly they were shoulders of rock needing blasting.

Hurley had disposed of three of them and was moving to the fourth when a grim, bearded old miner carrying a heavy-caliber rifle blocked his advance.

"See them monuments?" the miner asked, nodding his head toward piles of rock marking the corners of a mining claim. "They're mine. Nobody's goin' to lay tracks through my property. And nobody's goin' to kill me like they did Herb Wise."

"Why didn't you let us know when our crew drove the grade stakes?" Hurley demanded angrily.

"If you was fool enough to run stakes across my property, it weren't none of my business," the man answered. "But when you fix to drill and blast, that's somethin' else again. I'm tellin' you to stop."

"We've stopped," Hurley said, "but you ain't foolin' us any. Gorst hired you to do this. You know there ain't any mineral along this lake."

"I can show you gold as purty as you ever did see," the man declared. "Climb up here." He led the way up a steep wall to a line running through a block which was attached to a cliff. Hurley sat in a bos'n's chair and was hoisted up the face of the cliff. "Now what do you see?"

"Gold!" Hurley shouted down. "Plenty of it. Shouldn't be hard to mill, either." His eyes narrowed. "And with the railroad runnin' past

it could be shipped out and milled cheap."

"Railroad ain't goin' to run past," the miner declared, "unless they condemn a right of way, which'll cost 'em plenty or unless they buy my claim, which'll cost 'em a million dollars."

Hurley hurried to the end of steel, yelled at the locomotive engineer and asked to be run down to Warm Creek. "It's important," he explained.

The engineer nodded. "Some damned thing goin' to stop us from finishin' this job?" he asked. "Well, I've been expectin' it."

Ten minutes after the locomotive stopped in the Warm Creek yards, Cal Jessup and Nathan Land were running over the network of sidings. They swung aboard, followed by Hurley.

"Give her all you've got, Mike," Cal ordered.

Mike opened the throttle and made a record run to Icy Lake. He stopped at the end of steel and his trio of passengers broke into a dog trot.

"I'm Cal Jessup," Cal said to the miner, who was patently enjoying all the excitement he had created.

"I'm Monte Zumdick," the miner answered. "You see how things are. I've got a gold mine here, and you want to run through it."

"Something smells," Cal said evenly, "and I think it's a rat."

"Yeah," Hurley added, "I smelt a rat as soon as I got here. But he's got a gold mine, sure enough. Damned funny he'd uncover a mine just when this stretch was needed for the road."

"Nothin' funny about it at all," Monte Zumdick maintained stoutly. "When I heard the road was comin' I started lookin' for a hard-rock proposition within shippin' distance of steel. And danged if I didn't find it right where you wanted to go. I recorded my claim. I don't see why

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you didn't see the record when you filed your right-of-way papers?"

"Somebody was damned careful I shouldn't see it," Cal answered. "And I'm goin' to look into that, too. This is a holdup!" Zumdiek shifted nervously under Cal's accusing gaze. "And I'm not going to be held up."

"You can see for yourself I've got a mine," the miner argued. "It looks like we'll have to go to law over it, though I'll settle peaceable for a million dollars."

"A million dollars will buy a lot of peace anywhere," Cal said coldly. "But I'm not in the market." He knew there was no use of dickering. Zumdiek was there to stop the road. Likely there were other men with supposed mining claims along the lake shore.

CAL instinctively looked to the opposite shore, though he knew there wasn't a chance of building a road on that side. Hanging Glacier was discharging ice constantly. Masses weighing from one to a thousand tons were pushed to the brink of a cliff and dropped hundreds of feet into the lake. It was a breathtaking spectacle, literally a river of ice tumbling over a waterfall. And when ice wasn't falling, the stream draining the glacier spilled down, to ripple as the vagrant air currents caught it. There were moments when the falls resembled the tail of some giant white horse, blowing in the wind.

"Can't build a road over there," Zumdiek said triumphantly, "unless you want to drive tunnels through a couple of miles of solid rock. It'd be cheaper to make peace with me."

"I'm not going to waste any time dickering," Cal told him bluntly. "I'm starting condemnation proceedings."

Later talking to Nathan, he said, "If we crowd things and hire a good lawyer we'll still have a sporting

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chance to complete the road. Fortunately, we can carry on rock work in the middle of winter."

"How about the stretch from Icy Lake to Poor Man's Hell?" Nathan demanded. "We can't build that in the middle of winter. We can't grade and ballast frozen ground."

Cal sat down on the first projecting rock and studied the lake. "We'll build a siding on West Beach," he said, "and a small wharf with a single track running onto it. We'll bring up enough lumber to build a small scow, hoist a steam launch onto a flat car, ship it up here and drop it into the lake. The launch can tow the scow. I know it'll be an expensive way, but we can build the Icy Lake-Poor Man's Hell stretch in good weather."

"We can land steam shovels, mules, scrapers, and grub on East Beach," Nathan added. He grew enthusiastic over the possibilities. "And another thing, it's a gravity haul from the lake down to Poor Man's Hell. We can load rails on light flat cars and let gravity move the cars to the track layers. Mules can pull the empty cars back to the lake."

"And while we're about it, we'll rig up a stock car so the mules can ride on the down trip," said Cal. "That'll save somebody driving 'em back. In the meantime let's get things moving."

"Who can build a scow?" Nathan inquired practically.

"Everybody goes on a stampede," Cal answered, "and I'll bet I can find skilled men who can do anything from making a claw-hammer coat to building a scow."

"But what will you do if a law court decides Monte Zumdiek is within his rights and that you'll have to pay his price?" Nathan asked anxiously.

"But a court of law isn't likely to do that," Cal answered. "That isn't

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a real gold mine. That outcropping was salted. Somebody, probably Bull Shultz or Tuck Gorst, stood on ice at the lake and fired a shotgun loaded with gold nuggets at the outcropping. I found two of the empty shells when I came over the ice last winter. Don't worry, Nathan, we'll go through, as soon as all facts are presented to the court."

CAL sent Outside for a lawyer and, while waiting for him to arrive, forced things on Icy Lake. The steam launch was in the lake almost before the scow builders started work. The launch was used to transport men and supplies from West to East Beach.

On each return trip the launch carried miners who had heard rumors of Monte Zumdick's stopping the road. Some of them wanted to run Zumdick out of the country. They had ordered supplies and they could not cancel the orders, particularly where special mining machinery was being manufactured.

To each man, Cal Jessup made the same statement. "We'll deliver all freight to shippers in Poor Man's Hell by February 1st. If we don't, the Riley Construction Co. will stand all losses."

He couldn't make his attitude any plainer than that. It filled the shippers with confidence—confidence Cal himself almost needed at times. He was making the biggest gamble either he or Gid Riley had ever made.

"You're a gambler," Nathan Land told him, "with so much in the pot you can't drop out now. It's either win or quit the game thoroughly cleaned."

The lawyer Cal had sent for, arrived, visited Zumdick's claim and departed. "I'll need certain witnesses," he told Cal as he boarded

the steamer, "but I know where to find them. I may have to hire an associate counsel, someone who's an authority on mining law, but we'll win this case."

But precious weeks passed and no word came from him. "No news is good news," Marcia said, when Cal expressed his anxiety to her. "Cheer up, Cal. Your launch and scow are working twenty-four hours a day. The line from East Beach to Poor Man's Hell is being laid at record speed. Your men are contented and even Gorst and Shultz aren't bothering you any more."

"That's just it," Cal said. "They've disappeared, and they took Dan Riley and Monte Zumdick with them."

"Well, the *Narada* gets in tomorrow," Marcia said. "Perhaps there'll be a letter or two."

There was! Several letters for Marcia and a fair-sized pack of them for Cal. Like others, they stood in front of their post-office box, taking the letters as they were deposited. It was an old Alaskan custom.

Neither spoke a word until they were on the street and beyond earshot. Then Marcia turned to Cal. "If I report in New York March 1st I will get a try-out," she said soberly. "The letter said it is an unusual opportunity, and that if I came through with the talent and confidence I've shown here, I'll be on my way. Of course I'm not that good, but it was an encouraging letter."

"You are that good," Cal said stanchly.

"What about your news?" she asked. "That's the important thing now."

"I'll itemize it," he answered in a wry tone. "First, you noticed, didn't you, that Gorst, Dan Riley and Shultz returned on the *Narada*?

Three genial gents, well pleased with themselves and the world. I wondered, until I opened my lawyer's letter. Then I knew. They've engineered a whole flock of mining claim disputes. The suits were filed ahead of our action against Monte Zumdick. The court calendar is jammed with them. Our case can't be heard until late in December."

MARCIA looked dismayed. "Oh, Cal, how awful. That knocks the props out from under you, doesn't it?"

"Yes," he said gloomily. "But that isn't all. I ordered a locomotive and snow plow. Now I get word that they won't be ready for shipment for weeks yet. And unless that snow plow is here before snow flies, we're going to have grief at Bald Mountain and Windy Gap."

"More of Gorst's work?" Marcia asked sympathetically.

"Maybe. Or possibly it's just hard luck," said Cal. "Even Gorst can't be responsible for everything that goes wrong. But even that isn't all the bad news. John Law has found Caboose Riley and arrested him for Herb Wise's murder. I guess that's the total of my latest batch of grief."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Marcia. "Dan Riley is bearing down on you, and if the look in his eyes is any indication, he's flying flags of victory. He probably figures he's about due for a triumph."

"Maybe he's right," Cal admitted. "Hello, Dan," he greeted his rival. "What's on your mind?"

"I take it you've read your mail," Dan said importantly. "Then you know the court calendar is jammed and your suit can't possibly be heard until it is too late to complete the lake section of the road."

"Yes," Cal admitted, "I've read my lawyer's letter."

"Well," Dan informed him triumphantly. "I thought of that trick.

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Of course, if you want to buy out the interests we contend we have in these various claims, then you can withdraw all suits against the various defendants and clear the calendar. Only that will cost you a lot of money, more than my uncle will let you spend. I've had several battles with you, Jessup, and taken a few beatings, but I think I've won what my uncle regards as the most important of all—the last battle." Dan's gaze stayed on Cal's face for several tense seconds, then he glanced up at the sun, which was swinging south. The freeze-up was near, and Dan knew that even if the calendar was cleared it was doubtful if the road could be completed in time. Nevertheless, Cal, in his desperation, could perhaps be whipped into line. "Are you ready to talk turkey?" he asked.

"Yes," Cal answered slowly, "I am."

Marcia had been a silent listener to this conversation. Now she put her hand on Cal's arm. "Before you start talking, Cal," she said, "suppose we find out what John Law's assistant wants. See, he's coming over."

The deputy marshal who was in charge of things when John Law was away from the Glacier Inlet region, planted himself squarely in front of Cal Jessup. His face wore a stern, determined expression. "Jessup," he said, "the stockholders you unloaded that Bear Creek ground onto, have investigated the bench above the right of way. It's practically hungry ground. I have orders from John Law to arrest you and send you south on the *Narada*!"

Dan Riley seems about to win the "last battle." With arrest staring him in the face, will Cal have to concede victory to his rival? Will Caboose be convicted of a murder he did not commit? Read the concluding installment of this colorful and exciting serial in next week's issue.

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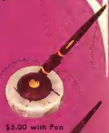
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